

UNFORBIDDEN FRUIT

WARNER FABIAN





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BY

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"SUMMER BACHELORS," ETC.



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FORESTALLMENT

(IN LIEU OF FOREWORD)

OBJECTION will be made at once by loyal alumnæ of various institutions that "Unforbidden Fruit" is not representative of girls' college life as a whole. It is not, nor is it meant to be. I have deliberately chosen to present a special phase through the medium of a special college set; girls of the modern, restless, experimental-minded, keen, cynical, adventurous and slightly neurotic type, pleasure-hunting and knowledge-hunting, as contemptuous of the "greasy grind" among their fellows, on the one hand, as of the cheap fusser or the "fervent collegiate" on the other; living in the peculiar atmosphere of compressed femininity which produces an intellectual and social reaction not unlike the prison psychosis of our penal institutions. There is no doubt but that, in this environment, normal tendencies and appetites, including sex, become at times exaggerated and inflamed.

The "Trumbull House set" does not typify a majority of the undergraduates of Wellesley, Smith, Vassar, or any other college. But it does represent a social entity which has come to be the most significant group in our female institutions, the most interestedly watched and discussed by the college at large, the most emulously patterned after, the most dangerous to established standards. Twenty years ago this group did

not exist. Ten years ago it would have been small, almost negligible as regards influence, secretive through caution of its creeds, self-consciously daring, and deemed radical and bad form if not actually immoral. To-day it comprises, with its imitators, fifteen, possibly twenty per cent of the campus community and sets the pace for all. To-morrow it may well be "the type" of American undergraduate womanhood.

A novel quite as typical could be made out of the scholastic girl, the athletic girl, the socially ambitious girl, the sweet, young marriageable girl, the pushingly collegiate girl, or the religious and social-serviceable girl. All of these are to be found in large numbers and more or less cohesive groups in our colleges. Such a story would have been equally true to latter-day female college life as this one. But it would be, from my point of view, less interesting.

W. F.

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CHAPTER I

SUITE TWENTY, Trumbull House, was in evening session. Feminine apparel, feminine appurtenances, feminine curves and angles, feminine voices were everywhere in the overcrowded living-room. The center table was strewn with a collection of text books, note books, magazines, a bridge manual, a copy of *Dusty Answer*, another of *Summer Bachelors*, a green stocking and a tan, a cracked jazz record, a bottle of headache tablets, five cigarette boxes and a Sophomore all impartially whitened with a new brand of talcum powder from a box which had inopportunately opened up while in aërial transit across the apartment. Half a dozen girls in the abandon of negligée gave to the divan the desperate appearance of a raft just after the shipwreck. Several others occupied the two chairs and a trunk, the contents of which were oozing out upon the floor pending a more orderly disposition.

On one wall a banner with the inspiring words "Sperry; 1928" in mauve and cerise was draped to form a train for a particularly malignant goblin-doll. Opposite was a framed legend, in an inexplicable species of worsted-work chastely conceived, posing the incontrovertible statement that "Home Is What You Make

It." There were also pictures of the kind which one might not too optimistically expect.

In the window corner a young gentlewoman stood upon her head.

Question and answer, comment, gossip, rejoicing and lamentation crossed and recrossed in the buzzing air.

"Have a good vacation?"

"Grand."

"Lousy."

"Not so rotten."

"The old dump isn't so bad to get back to."

"Oh, gee! Isn't it! Sixteen more weeks of slay-ver-ee."

"With no break in the clouds till the big football games."

"Given any thought to the Big Hop yet, Gwen?"

*"The thirteenth man I asked to Prom
Has just gone back on me,"*

chanted a voice a little off key.

"Nixie's rooming alone, so I——"

"——elected Biology Two, God help me, before I found out——"

"And if any one so much as whispers 'hockey' to me, I'll——"

"What I heard about her not coming back, even the tabloids wouldn't print."

"Who's that, Celia?"

"——harder than ever this semester, and if it is, I'm sunk; simply sunk."

"Well, you won't go down alone."

"Kaplan & Boyle may be more expensive, but I will say this for——"

"Maybe they *are* married."

"Basket ball? Too much toil. I got a shiner to take to the Yale-Harvard game, last year."

"——taste like incense to me. I wouldn't smoke 'em if you gave——"

"Sure! Parked her nightie at the Bostwick for a bluff and *then* where did she go? Ask Mister Foster at the Travel Bureau."

"Damn the Self-Guv. . . . Anybody here on it?"

"Always beefing about sex complexes. They faire me a mal a l'estomac, that bunch."

"Moi aussi; a pain in the ear."

"——doubled two spades and instead of going back to di——"

"In beige duveteen. Actually!"

"Some stinkin' swine swiped my lab outfit. I ask you!"

"Roxy Ann! Remember that Sperry College was founded to instill in us the spirit and demeanor of Christian gentlewomen."

"Now, *everybody*!" (This in a shrill, derisive falsetto.) "Three sweet chee-ahs for Old Spay-ree!"

"Oh, pipe down. You nauseate me."

"Me, I never want to see a drink or a man or a night club again in my life."

The inverted gentlewoman in the corner grunted abruptly and skeptically, for the proponent of this self-abnegating proposition was known as the most indefatigable prom-trotter in college. Pink Delavan's genius for getting away to some kind of festivity over

every week-end while still maintaining her standing in class was the wonder and despair of friend and foe. A slight, quick, homely girl addressed the grunter.

"As you were, Starr. You'll have apoplexy."

"Two minutes to go yet."

"What's the idea?" inquired Sara La Lond, lithe and stringy and pantherine, with dead black hair and eyes that burned behind her studious glasses. She had "made" a key in Junior year and was hot on the trail of other honors, in addition to which she was a formidable athlete, possessing a fierce energy of body and mind alike. Neither line of achievement would of itself have gained her admittance to the close corporation of free spirits which had made Trumbull House the most conspicuous dormitory at Sperry, for this particular group sat boastfully in the seat of the scorner and the "athletic" girl was as much anathema to them as the "greasy grind" or the "collegiate soul." But the combination of scholastic and physical prowess, together with a queer spiritual aloofness and independence, gave to Sara a piquancy of repute and so a standing among her peers.

"Reduction. Latest wrinkle. Night and morning," the girl called Starr answered her, adding in frank explanation " 'Fraid of getting too hippy! "

"Doesn't Duke like 'em that way?" gently queried Roxy Ann (née Rosanne) Merrick, a thick-set and tawny blonde.

The other not deigning to respond, the leading question was answered for her by an arrival from the inner room. "Don't get rancid, Rocks," advised the newcomer.

The proprietress of half-rights in Suite Twenty was a brisk, brownish nineteen-year-old with the bearing of self-confidence and self-competency so characteristic of generously nurtured American girlhood. To her poised room-mate she said: "Come off it, Starr."

Being incompetent, for good and sufficient reasons, to shake her head, the other waved her feet negatively. Sylvia Hartnett raised her voice. "I've got some news that I'll bet 'll bring you down. Our Giff's grown a 'stash."

There was a heavy flop. Miss Starr Mowbray lay upon her back, her legs sprangled out, her empurpled face turned to the ceiling, her deep-drawn breath filling the lines of her sweater with the ripple of curves. Even in that sprawly attitude and with her features congested from blood-pressure she was alluring to look at.

"Say it ain't true, dee-rie! Say it ain't true!" she besought, kicking feebly.

At once the conversation concentrated upon the most popular member of the faculty.

"Have you seen him?" demanded Gwen Peters, tall, languid and the mainstay of the crowd in fabricating ingenious excuses and stratagems for more or less unlawful week-ends.

"No. The biddy in the South corridor told me. She was almost in tears."

"Ruined!" exclaimed Celia Forsythe hollowly.

"And I elected History Three just for his sweet sake," groaned Helen Quigg, the plainest of the crew and one of the most popular.

"One of the most poisonous courses in the currick," added Pink Delavan in deep gloom, having been led

to do the same by the austere charms of young Prof. Patterson Gifford.

"I nicked him for an A in Mediæval last semester," bragged Roxy Ann.

"Because you sweated and swotted and swilled every class he's given," retorted Sylvia. "I b'lieve you're in love with the man."

"Ain't we all?" yawned Gwen.

"I'll bet the new shrubbery absolutely gums his noble façade," was the pessimistic forecast of Miss Quigg, who was taking landscape gardening and was given to the technicalities thereof.

"Oh, I dunno," put in Bertha Ruehl, generally known as "Golden" for the sake of the pun rather than from her coloring, which was that of the useful though not artistic brick. "Maybe it'll only make him sterner-looking and more fascinating. Anyway, it won't affect his militaristic voice. I always feel as if I ought to stand and salute when he calls my name."

"I wonder how much of that snap-your-head-off stuff is bluff." This from Celia.

"Ask Nixie. She tried to make him all last term."

"Nixie's got as much chance of making Giff as she has of making Phi Bete," was Gwen's scornful estimate.

"Oh, I d'know. She doesn't lose so many fish off the hook."

"If you ask me," proffered Sara La Lond unflatteringly, "I don't believe he even knows we're alive, except as something to shoot his sarcasms at."

"He knows Starr's alive, and he doesn't shoot at her," asserted Roxy Ann.

"I'm not. I'm dead." She rolled feebly.

Gwen murmured in Helen Quigg's ear: "He's always playing up to Starr in class, but watch him when he looks at Syl—which isn't often."

"How do you two Juniors rate these quarters anyway?" demanded Jessamine Dahl, a Senior. "They're the best in the House."

"Oh, we just happened to get 'em," was Sylvia's careless rejoinder. She was the sort of girl who obviously would "just happen to get" the desirable things of the world by simply and confidently assuming the right to them, she being what she was, one of the blessed but by no means meek inheritors of the earth.

With a single, lithe movement the self-proclaimed corpse came to life and its feet. "And, Gawds, what a mess they're in!" she commented. "How I *loathe* cleaning up!"

"Got to be done, though," said her room-mate. "Match you for the big dresser, old bird."

"Lend me a cent, somebody. All right; I'll match you. . . . Tails."

"Heads."

"Damn!"

"You unpack first, then."

Upon this broad hint the others made their good nights and drifted out, yawning, planning, making dates, cursing the resumption of studies, comparing notes on classes and courses, on house parties and fashions and the male sex. As soon as the door closed Starr fell upon her wardrobe with resolute ferocity. Hers was the simple method of transfer in bulk. She would scoop from the floor an armful of shimmery underwear, hurl it into a drawer, subject it to the

violent compression of a pair of pile-driving fists, superimpose as many stockings, handkerchiefs, brassières and other articles of bric-à-brac as represented capacity-plus, then jam the drawer to and repeat the formula until the receptacle was full. Her frocks she hung in an insufficient clothes-press (colleges are always niggardly about storage space) with the athletic costumes readiest to hand as she would live mainly in these convenient garments except when she went away or men were down for week-ends. Starr could afford careless garb. She was an eyeful in anything.

Her companion's method was radically different. Sylvia Hartnett, Puritan by long ancestry and in many of her lesser habits, though few of her thoughts, was a devotee of neatness. She was inviolably spick-and-span, and dressed to the cool freshness of her personality, which had its special allure, dangerous beyond the charms of more obvious beauty, when she chose to exercise it. Her belongings, down to the smallest ribbon, she disposed with an exactitude of perfection which might have been spinsterish in another. Nothing about Sylvia suggested the spinster, however. Hers was the clear-cut brilliance of the crystal with perhaps a flame latent at its heart.

When the last wrinkle had been coaxed out of the final blouse and it had been patted and petted into place, she turned to the other.

"Have a good time?"

"Swell."

"New York?"

"Mostly."

"Anything (meaning anybody) new?"

"A couple."

"Serious?"

"Pleasing."

"Undies?" This apparently compromising but actually innocent abbreviation touched upon the point of the subjects' scholastic status, indicating any member of an undergraduate body.

"Yep. One was a Dah-diddy and one a swoddy."

"West Point's all right in its way, but I sure do admire them Dartmouth lads." In the bright lexicon of Sperry youth a West Pointer is a swoddy—much to his indignation if he hears it.

"You'll prob'ly see 'em both before the long winter's over."

"I'll betcha." Miss Mowbray's swains almost invariably followed through until she dismissed them in weariness, which usually occurred soon, as she was of a polyandrous trend of mind. "Neck 'em?"

"Not so much. Except, once, the swoddy. On a party. Club Irriwaddy. That's the latest. Champagne from floor to ceiling."

"Give me Scotch—and darn little of that."

"That's your glum New England ancestry. If you try to keep going all night on H₂O you lose the pace. Do you know, Syl," she pursued with reflective regret, "I don't get as much kick out of things as I used to. And I'm only twenty. What the hell do you suppose is the matter with me? Even necking is losing its kick."

"Naturally."

The other stared. "When did you get so wise? Have you resigned from the touch-me-not school of thought?"

"No. It's still theory rather than practice with me. But it stands to reason it'd be poor stuff unless you go through with it."

"You're an immoral woman, my child."

"Immoral, nothing! I'm logical. I never could see anything in this halfway stuff that you all pull," returned the younger girl coolly. "Why get yourself all stirred up over a false alarm?"

"How do you know it's going to be false? It might be a real fire."

"Oh, *well!* It never is with your type and if it was you'd send in a loud yell for the hose-cart. Me, if I ever come to the Rubicon, I'm not going to take off my shoes'n stockin's and just wade. Sink or swim for mine."

"All right, Cæsar. Me, I'm for Old Mother Goose, modern version; keep your clothes on your rickety limbs and don't go *too* near the water. Well, what's vacation done for you?"

"Oh, I've been butterflying, too. Detroit isn't New York, but it isn't so dead slow at that."

"Any new suitors?"

"Bob's been playing me pretty hard, and Winsome Walter from Williams gave me a week's attention before he got the bum's rush to make up a condition. Also that Gale lad of Nixie's showed enthusiasm at the one party I met him at. I wouldn't mind snitching him from Nixie if it wasn't too much trouble."

"How come, trouble?"

"Playing up, the way she does with her men."

"D'you expect something for nothing?"

"No-o-o. But that type wants too much. You can't be in a huddle *all* the time; it isn't football."

Starr laughed. "Maybe you're right. I'll say this for the lads, though; they never really get rough unless you give 'em a start."

"Well, I don't. I'm not electing Physical X this year. Speaking of which——"

"Speaking of what?"

"Physical experimentation. I went into the post office at Trenton while I was visiting there on my way East."

"Did you? . . . Where's that other black stocking? What's that got to do with your course in Physical X?"

"Not mine; yours. I was looking for a letter for Sarepta Schallenburger. And there she was."

Starr whirled violently around. "*What?* A letter?"

"No. Not a letter. Sarepta, her name. Posted on the advertised list. It was an old one."

Starr's lips were parted, eager, mirthful. But her eyes slid away from those of her companion. "My poor Fritzie-officier! Who would have supposed that he could have taken that preposterous alias seriously!"

"I've always heard that the Saxons were a serious-minded people. Probably he wrote to say he was coming over."

"Oh, God! Well, he'll never find me."

"Bet a hat he does. It'd be lover's luck. Well, chance vs. virtue. You'd better keep off the public streets. . . . Great Grief! What's that?"

The whole place shook with the impact of a tre-

mendous thump overhead. Starr uplifted an indignant demand:

"What the devil are you pulling up there? An earthquake?"

A silence followed. Then there was a shuffling sound on the stair and a light knock at the door, which opened, at the word of bidding, upon a penitent but composed apparition. "I'm sorry," said a clear voice. "Did it do any harm?"

"Only to our nervous systems. Come in, Freshman."

"My trunk tipped over." Verity Clarke stepped into the light, looking in the loose negligée, which only half concealed her nightgown, like a tousled and charming little girl. She had entered college from the West the previous year, but her career had been inconspicuous, except for a rather marked success in a small part in the Dramatic Club, and she had dropped out, halfway, because of a death in her family. Now she was back, taking her freshman year over. She had the calmly questioning eyes of childhood, a tenderly modeled outline of face, an undersized nose just a bit tilted, and a pink-and-brown softness of skin, the face being redeemed from mere characterless prettiness by the firm, shrewd and humorous mouth. In build she was strong and in stature above the medium, but so lightly was she poised that she seemed delicate and rather small. Late in the season she had been admitted to the jealously restricted table over which Starr, Sylvia, and Gwen Peters held despotic though unofficial sway. So they knew her well.

"Didn't know you'd moved in upstairs," said Sylvia.

"I only just did. And now I'm moving out. It's

revolting." The big eyes were humid with resentment.

"What's the matter?"

"Jinny—she was going to room with me—has been kicked. She hasn't been doing any work at all this year; says she hates the place anyway. And two seniors have put in a bid for the room."

"Pretty rotten, young Clarkey. Where are you going?"

The girl hesitated. "Olga Tremwich wants me to room with her over in Blatch."

Starr looked up quickly. "D'you like her, kid?"

"Sometimes I do and sometimes I don't. She's been awfully nice to me. But she's so funny. She looks as if she was—well, *hairy*. You needn't laugh at me, Hartnett. I almost feel as if I'd been asked to room with a man."

The two older girls exchanged looks. "I wouldn't be in any hurry about deciding, kid," advised Starr carelessly. "It's easier to get into a room than to get out of it sometimes, in this-woman's-college."

"I've got to go somewhere," said Verity with a touch of petulance. She sneezed. "Good night."

"Know the Tremwich person, Syl?" asked Starr as their visitor left.

"Tall, black girl; scraggly around the neck? Sophomore?"

"That's the one. Sings second alto on the glee."

"Oh-h-h-h-h!" Sylvia's voice carried through the circumflex of enlightenment.

"What do you say we crab her little game and take the kid in with us?"

"This is no Rescue Mission," protested Sylvia.

"No. But——"

"At that, she wouldn't fit in so badly," admitted the other. "She's different enough from our style to make a good third. And maybe," she added optimistically, "we could work her to make our beds. Think she'd come?"

"She'd jump at the chance. Don't count too much on working her, though. That's a stiff little lower jaw of hers."

"Oh, well, she ought to pay something for rooming with the two most popular girls in the place," said Miss Hartnett modestly. "Anyway we can try it out. Match you to see who goes up to call her."

"You do. You've got your shoes on."

"Oh, all right," grumbled Sylvia. "But that's a breakfast-place hold-out you owe me, then."

She left, presently returning with the Freshman.

"Sit down, Vee," Starr invited. "How'd you like to come in with us?"

"I'd love it." Verity's clear eyes sparkled. "But how can I get out of going with Olga? I haven't exactly promised but I expect——"

"Leave that to us," grimly cut in Starr. "When could you move in?"

"Why, 'most any time."

"Take two or three days to think it over. In the meantime," Miss Mowbray's demeanor became lofty and severe, "we will hold a preliminary conference on Life in its Higher Meanings as lived within the hallowed precincts of Old Sperry, for the benefit of our young companion. Freshman, stand up."

Verity obeyed, smoothing down her dress and trying to look appropriately demure.

"Freshman, you are about to enter into intimate association with two wise guys. According to the sacred traditions of this, our Alma Mater, which provide that the upperclasswomen shall guide and mold the immature minds of the lower, we shall endeavor by precept and example to impart to you a working knowledge of What Every Young Girl Ought Not to Know." She rose, pointing with rigid arm to the "Home Is What You Make It" legend. "Do you see on yonder wall, Freshman, the guiding motto of Suite Twenty?"

"Yes."

"You do not! Turn it over, Syl."

The reverse side showed a large "Verboten" in uncompromising Germanic script. In the angle of the V nestled a half-smoked cigarette. The B housed a champagne cork, mumpily swollen. Over the T was draped a notice of a flunk in Latin affixed with a wad of chewing gum, while the final N was festooned with a pinkish ribbon, obscure of symbolism, but bearing evidence of having derived from that prehistoric appliance, the corset.

"Now you do," pursued the orator of the occasion. "The trimmings are supposed to indicate the reverse English on the motto. The guiding principle of this community is that nothing is verboten that you can get away with. As casual visitors from the Self-Guv or the faculty have no art in their souls we keep the smooth side out and the hairy side in, most of the time. Turn it back, Syl, dear."

"It's a lovely sign," said Verity with conviction. "Where did it come from?"

"Tell you the sad story one of these days. For the present I wish to direct your attention to the neat initials along the foot. Read 'em and tremble."

"H.B.V.," obediently translated the newcomer.

"The official title of this apartment," explained the Junior, "is 'At the Sign of the Two Hard Boiled Virgins.' We got the idea from a book title and filched it for our own. Ain't it sweet?"

"Swell," breathed the catechumen admiringly.

"Alterable to Three upon proper and sufficient warranty. Raise your right hand, Freshman. Now—can you qualify?"

Verity Clarke flushed softly. "Oh, yes!" she asseverated,

CHAPTER II

ONLY three weeks completed of the term and already drab monotony had descended upon Suite Twenty. The future loomed, hopeless, endless, riftless beneath the dank clouds of academic routine. The menacing cloud of exams and the work necessary to pass them were too far distant to get up any excitement over. There was just simply nothing doing.

The three occupants of Twenty sat, disconsolate, and brooded upon the boundless opportunities of the past vacation, insufficiently appreciated at the time, as they now perceived. Outside a soft night wind was blowing out of clouds that smelled of unshed rain. Windows stood open to its lure. It carried restlessness like a contagion, dim pulses, uneasy discontents, fortunately not fully interpretable to the blood wherein they stirred as leaves thrill when the sap rises. A masculine-toned bell droned out ten strokes of warning to the campus.

At its behest, oblongs of light on the ground floors blackened into flat nullity. Bolts were shot. A few scurrying figures, light leaves borne by winds of apprehension, flitted toward the buildings in process of cloture. The super-accented jazz of

Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

Helps to shoo the blues aw—

was cut off short of the final syllable. Sperry was composing itself to a decorous silence, if not to slumber.

Twin windows on the second floor of Trumbull House were discreetly lowered. The shades descended, leaving only a thin, golden outline. Had any college mentor been prowling, she might have guessed—it was a fair hypothesis at any time—that the trio in Twenty were again ignoring the rules made and provided by the sainted Founder “for the control, safeguard, and higher education of the Young Maidenhood of America” in the year of grace and virtue 1845, and since that time unaltered through the changing generations. Two fine points of radiance within the dimmed room marked a phase of mutant time, since it is historically as well as inherently improbable that the virginal Althea Sperry smoked cigarettes.

Though there were but two scofflaws in the room, there was a third occupant, now apparent merely as a rumpled and tawny head, bowed in the semicircle of the corner desk light. A pen scratched intermittently.

“Quit it, Starr, and rest thy weary bean,” counseled Sylvia, asprawl on the divan.

“Can’t. Wimps has sprung one of his poisonous quizzes on us for to-morrow.”

“Wear your shortest skirt and your pinkest stockings and cross your knees at him. William Winckler, Ph.D., ain’t no bus driver. Legs are more of a treat to him than brains.”

Briefly and despondently Miss Mowbray disposed of this encouragement by stating that she sat in the third row, well beyond the area of display. “Throw me a

Lucky, one of you. And if you want to talk, *talk*. But for God's sake don't whisper."

"You're a sour grouch when you get low in your work," observed her chum without resentment. "We'll give you ten minutes' silence."

She rearranged the pillows, so disposed at the bottom crack of the door as to prevent any betraying whiff of smoke from exuding into the hall and offending the prehensile nostrils of a casually wandering Self-Guv official. Verity Clarke peered out into the spangled stillness of the night. She ducked back sharply as a compact, dark body shot downward from the story above. Plumpff! a soft impact on the path below.

"What's that?" asked the startled freshman.

"That?" drawled the loller on the divan. "Why that's prob——" Plop! a second sound of the same kind. "——ably Nixie," concluded the expositor.

Said Starr, absently: "Is Paul up? Or is it the Gal-lus Gale?"

"Dunno. Can't keep tabs on Nixie's court."

A huge, informulate object flopped and sidled downward. "*Why* is she throwing things out of the window?" queried Verity wildly.

"One of her boy-friends is week-ending in town. Look out and you'll probably see him."

Before the gaze of the eavesdropper a dark figure moved from an angle of the building, gathered up the fallen objects and withdrew, monstrously swollen.

"If he's thick and stubby, it's Paul. If he's tall and graceful——"

"He is."

"Then it's Gale the Gallant."

"Those things looked like—like bedclothes," said the shocked neophyte.

"Right. Haven't you learned about Nixie's line yet? Two pillows and a comforter. They're going thicketing and it's a chilly night."

"Thicketing? Where?"

"Well, if it's Gale he'll have his car and they'll park somewhere in that."

"Do you mean they'll *sleep* there?"

"I don't know how much sleeping they'll do. But it's a good bet that Nixie doesn't get back in time to beat the dawn's early light by many hours."

"But isn't it dangerous? Aren't they likely—— Don't they ever——"

"Sure, they 'ever.'" Starr turned in her chair, winking at Sylvia.

"Though seldom the first time they elect the All-night course," qualified Sylvia, who had caught the signal.

"No. And not usually the second, do you think?"

"Hardly. Nor, on the average, the third."

"A girl might even edge past the fourth and fifth." (It had become an antiphony now, following a free formula.)

"I've heard of cases where it ran to a dozen times, before——"

"But, sooner or later——"

"Oh, sure! Sooner or later——"

"If you keep on playing that game——"

"Along comes Old Lady Trouble——"

"And knocks you for a row of triplets."

"Oh!" gasped Verity, her face a picture. The counterpoint proceeded:

"So, be warned, Little Vee——"

"And stay in of nights——"

"As a virtuous little Freshman should——"

"And you'll live safe, if not happy, ever after."

"You're joshing me," accused the subject of this mild and customary form of hazing, it being considered beneficial to the unformed minds of the Freshmen to administer salutary shock. "You don't really mean that Elsie Nichols would do anything like that, do you?"

Joshing was one thing; blackening the character of a housemate quite another. Sylvia proceeded to explication while Starr returned to her toil. "Leave Nixie out of it. Sometimes things do happen. But not so often. And if they do, it's generally a mistake—on both sides. Just because a boy and a girl jaunt out, fitted up like a hall bedroom, it doesn't mean that Mr. and Mrs. John Jones are registered at the Inn of the Silver Moon." (Verity looked at first bewildered, then enlightened, then relieved, at this elaborate symbolism.) "Specially Nixie. She knows her onions. They leave no traces on her pure young breath."

"But how will she get in?"

"Celia's window gives on the steps. It's an easy crawl, even for lazy Nixie."

Starr came back again from the dull realms of philology to the living interest of the moment. "Get this right, Kid. Nine-tenths of the girls at Sperry are in Class V." (This esoteric initial the Freshman was able to interpret by a slight exercise of the imagination.)

"Make it ninety-five per cent, Starr," came from the divan.

"Maybe that'd be nearer. With the five or more per cent that have gone the limit, it's been casual and experimental in the majority of cases. Then there's the halfway kind."

Sylvia made a wry face. "Teasers. They make me greech."

"If they want to try it out, that's their business; it's cowardice, not virtue that's the final barrier in their cases." Again Starr bent over her papers, then with a wild sweep, sent them flying to the floor. "Hell! I can't work to-night," she wailed.

Penitent, Verity apologized. "We'll shut up. Honest, Starr."

"It isn't you. It's something in the air."

"Nixie's pillows," sniggered Sylvia.

"Something of the sort, I expect. Gee! I wish I had me a man. Don't look scared, Freshman. It'd only be for a whirl in a car and a little conversation." She jumped up, strode across the room and with a flourish turned the framed motto around revealing the "Verboten" sign. This was a proclamation of emancipation for the session.

Verity's eyes brightened with curiosity. "When are you going to tell me where you got that?"

"She got it," said Sylvia, "from one of those prim little Noah's ark wood-lots that the Germans call a forest, and it nearly cost her her well-known hard-boiled virt——"

"Wait a *minute*," cut in Starr. "I'm the heroine of this here romance and I don't want a wrong slant put

on it. It was really a very innocent and pastoral little one-act play."

"With an epilogue," added the other maliciously, "unless you intend to bowdlerize the story."

"Not at all. You see, there was this little German cavalry officer who arrested me for snitching the sign," Starr explained to Verity. "Politely but firmly. Then he unarrested me. Then we had lunch together at a funny little inn in the forest. He was very spick-and-span and spoke English with an accent that made you want to laugh and purr at the same time. And he had a mustache that I just naturally *craved*; the most enticing little mustache! But he didn't understand our queer American ways, poor lamb! That's where the trouble began. His manners were so correct, too, up to a certain point. Then, because I'd lunched with him in a private room and let him kiss me a couple of times as a mark of appreciation of his kindness and hospitality (it isn't polite to grunt, Syl) he thought that everything went, and there was one crisis where I thought I'd have to do a paper hoop through the window. When I got it into his surprised head that there were Verbotens in our social system, too, he was too *sweet*. He stood up very straight and clicked his heels together and begged my pardon so handsomely for having misunderstood the so-puzzling customs of the American jeune fille. (He'd taken me for anything but a jeune fille, up to then), and expressed his hopes that he might see me again if he came to America some time."

"Oh-h-h-h!" breathed the younger girl, entranced. "Then you are going to see him again."

"I hope not." A faint flush had come up under Starr's fair skin.

"Don't you *want* to?"

"Of course I want to. But there might be complications. You see, just to make him feel better about it—he was really looking quite sad and wistful and droopy toward the end—I told him—this was after we'd had dinner together also and he'd motored me back to my lamenting family and I'd bidden him a fond farewell—maybe a little fonder than I'd really intended it to be—well, after all that I told him that if he did come to America and found me, I'd—well, this time I might turn the Verboten toward the wall!"

"Starr! You gave him your address? Of course he'll hunt you up."

"I gave him *an* address, all right, Miss Sarepta Schallenburger, Trenton, N. J. Poor Arnold! I can see him poring over the S's in the Trenton directory now. Fancy his taking a name like that seriously!"

"A mean, grudging spirit, you got it," commented Sylvia.

"I suppose you'd have done better."

"I dunno." She contemplated the legend. "It's an awfully select sign. I don't believe I'd cheat an innocent young cavalry officer out of a sign like that. You know my high and noble principles; never start anything you aren't willing to finish."

"I'm not so sure I'm not willing to finish it," retorted Starr.

"Oh, you're a bluff. . . . Listen. Somebody's coming along the hall."

"If it's one of the god-hoppers, we're sunk."

Inexperienced Verity dashed into her bedroom with her cigarette. The others threw theirs out of the window and made a fast but futile reach for their books: If it was a warden, a night wandering but most improbable faculty member, or one of the elect of the student boards who would be bound by her office to report them, they were probably sunk anyway. The room reeked.

There was a hesitant knock. "Who is it?"

"It's only me," came the deprecating response.

"Ida McKay," whispered Starr. This was the House borrower, curiosity-sniffer, and bore. Having rather more than a suspicion of her painful repute she always announced herself as "only me" or "only Ida." She was a faded wisp of a creature, "about the general color and consistency of a freckle," as Gwen Peters had once remarked of her.

"What do you want?" asked Sylvia.

"Can't I come in for a minute?"

"Starr's working like a fool."

"I just wanted to ask you about something," said the applicant in a hurt tone.

"Oh, all right." None too graciously.

Upon this permission the door, which, under the rules could never be kept locked, opened. To support her mate's fiction, Starr buried her nose in her book. Ida insinuated herself in.

"Got a Lucky?" she asked. "Oh, *that* isn't what I came to ask," she added hurriedly. "Do any of you know whether Nixie's out?"

"No," said Starr. "Don't know anything about it."

"What's your interest?" queried Sylvia. "She hasn't snitched a man of yours, has she?"

Poor Ida had never been known to have a man, except once, at Commencement, a brother. And a sad affair was he!

"Weh—well, I heard," said the intruder almost sniveling at this brutality, "that Sid Gale was in town, and there's liable to be fire drill to-night."

This was serious. Fire drill meant that all occupants of the House must turn out for inspection and roll-call, and any one failing to appear, unless there was a green card record as evidence that she was out of town by permission, would have explanations to make and grave penalties to face. Nixie Nichols was no special friend of the Twenty trio. But in the matter of escapades, particularly with a man in the offing, there is an impenetrable solidarity among the girls, only the most virulently self-righteous of the student officials gladly reporting any culprit, and the others doing anything in reason to shield her. For who knows when her own turn may come?

"What time?" asked Starr, lifting her nose from her book.

"I wasn't told. It's only a rumor. But this is the kind of night they would have one."

"It certainly is." Sylvia and Starr looked at each other. "Any way of getting word to her?"

"I'll go," volunteered Verity.

"You wouldn't know how to get back in again."

"I'd do it," said Ida mournfully, "only I haven't an idea of where to find them and the watchman would be

sure to catch me and report me. He doesn't like me; I'm sure I don't know why."

Ida never did "know why" people did not like her. Sylvia had a comforting thought. "Nixie probably knows all about it if there's a drill on. She's got a way of finding out those things."

"Well, maybe. I hope so, I'm sure. I just thought I'd tell you." Ida shifted and shuffled and changed the subject awkwardly. "Either of you got any notes on Giff's Miracle Plays lecture?"

Neither of them (if they were to be believed) had.

"Giff's got a down on me," whined the victim of man's inhumanities. "I just know he's going to flunk me out if he can."

"Then why do you chew gum in his class? You know he hates it." Prof. Gifford's searing sardonicisms upon the subject of "super-induced prognathism in the adolescent female jaw" had afforded vast delight to all the class except Miss McKay and a few other unfortunates. Giff was regarded as being at his fascinating best in impersonal sarcasm.

"You two smoked cigarettes with him in extra class, behind the stage," retorted Ida, greatly daring, and, regretting her temerity, added a palliating; "so I heard."

"That's a damn lie," returned Sylvia calmly. (It wasn't.)

"And you're a damn liar if you repeat it," added Starr.

"Oh, I won't!" In a failing voice she tried to borrow a type-ribbon and, foiled in that, compromised on a pad, and bade them "g'night." But they were not yet

rid of the incubus. With the door half opened she paused, cocking her head and beckoning the others mysteriously.

"Get out or come in, you simp!" fiercely whispered Sylvia. "Do you want to fill the house with smoke?"

"Did you hear it?" asked Ida, stepping back.

"Hear what?"

"Steps." She pointed across the hall.

"What's the matter with the girl!" said the disgusted Starr. "Have you got ghosts?"

"It's Sara La Lond. Lots of nights I've heard her. She walks back and forth, back and forth."

"What if she does? She's working for her scholarship. Wouldn't hurt you if you did more of your walking in your own room."

"All night, sometimes," persisted the other. "I've heard her at five in the morning."

"Oh, beat it!"

When the visitor had rid them of her drab and unkindly presence Starr said thoughtfully: "I've heard that, too. D'you s'pose she's in any trouble? Money or something like that?"

"She isn't the kind you could go to and ask."

"Oh, well! I expect it's just that she's been working too hard and got insomnia. She'll land the Alumnae Scholarship, and then she'll be on Easy Street. Vee gone to bed?"

"Yep," said the clear voice from the small room.

"Good example, soon followed." The other two were quickly out of their clothes. College girls learn to be swift and time-saving in these matters.

Alone in her tiny room, the freshman was restless.

Expectancy of the alarm gong kept her half awake. She heard midnight strike on the college bell and long afterward light footsteps outside her window. "Nixie," she thought, relieved. Two figures appeared and vanished momentarily into adjacent shadow. Soon the girl-figure emerged. Verity had a clear view of her face in the moonlight. It was rapt, drowsy, languorous, heavy with strange, unsated hungers. Verity vaguely and in spite of herself wondered whether—— She felt small, warm shudders tingle through her body.

The brazen clangor of the fire bell recalled her from the dream. She pushed her window down, seized her bathrobe and towel in accordance with the regulation, and dashed for the hallway. Nixie was just coming down the stairs, looking sleepily innocent and resentful.

CHAPTER III

TWITCHING his bulbous-headed club of a cane, Professor Patterson Gifford strode across the campus. The formidable weapon invariably accompanied him even when conditions indicated the more protective umbrella, and it was no rare occurrence for him to be seen surging athletically along some country road through night and rain, miles from the campus, for he was an inveterate hiker and contemptuously impervious to weather. It had served as text and object lesson for one of his most popular lectures, "The Instinct of Combat as the Germ of Wars." He was wont to maintain, with that dry, hard vehemence which gave point to his words, that a cane was either a practical weapon or a vapid foppery, and that he would as soon carry a revolver loaded with chocolate creams as a stick with which he could not fell a man at need. The legend that "Giff" had once killed a man with that weapon was only one of the alluring traditions which gathered about his vivid and romantic personality.

Eager girl-eyes watched the swift progress of the rather small, wiry, compact body, every easy movement of which told of a nervous muscularity. The head, under the modish cap—all of Giff's apparel was of the very best—was firm-set with curly, dark hair, blue eyes under black brows, a thin-lipped mouth, the sensitive nose of the scholar, and the chin of a tyrant. He was

a distinctly handsome man who gave the impression of being amusedly cognizant and contemptuous of his good looks and of their all-too-obvious effect in the super-feminized atmosphere wherein he lived and moved and had his academic being. For the rest, he possessed an abrupt manner, a biting voice, a Puritanical conscience in all matters of scholastic standard, and a fund of infinite and long-suffering patience with an often absent wife who sniveled because a Ford wasn't good enough for her and the world was cursedly spiteful in other important particulars.

As he passed Trumbull Hall the instructor of youth raised his head slightly to where Sylvia Hartnett sat in her window. Their eyes met. It was a daily greeting without overt sign or signal but for the time it sufficed.

Neither Sylvia nor Patterson Gifford could have told when that mutual curiosity which dangerously precedes desire first manifested itself. Each was sharply conscious of it from early in their acquaintance, clearly confident that the other felt it, also. Opportunities of contact between an undergraduate and a "faculty" are rare and difficult in an environment where scandal is an orchid, requiring little more than air to nourish it. Moreover the youngish professor had built up as defense a campus tradition for rather ill-tempered reserve which he could not well abandon in favor of any individual. His college reputation, indeed, was that of a grouch, but of a grouch with titillating possibilities. The girls respected him for his undoubted intellectual capacity, and his unbending taskmastership. Yielding to authority and deriving a thrill from the yielding, is a

peculiarly feminine trait. The more daring spirits wondered if he could be tempted. Something in his very reserve—as if it might be a necessary bulwark against unacknowledged tendencies within himself—inspired that kind of speculation.

Against Sylvia the barriers might have remained inviolate throughout her college course but for the chance of a train ride just before the previous vacation, in a crowded car where the other half of her seat was the only unoccupied space. Not until after he had disposed his package of books in the rack did she reveal herself from behind her fashion magazine. Then he made as if to get up, muttering something about the smoker. But the girl had not spent a whole semester in his class without suspecting a latent interest on his part. She resolved upon a daring initiative.

“If I am in your way I’ll move,” she murmured.

“I beg your pardon!” (“The way he said it,” commented Sylvia, narrating the encounter to her thrilled roommates later, “would have frozen the side-whiskers off a walrus.”)

“I won’t talk to you,” she promised.

He settled back. After a time she heard a hard, dry chuckle. His first words almost lifted her out of her seat.

“Ever been drunk?”

“Yes.”

“Like it?”

“No.”

“Neither did I.”

She controlled her voice to casualness in the query, “Do you do it often?”

"Never have before. Never expect to again."

She asked shrewdly, "What's the idea? Experience?"

"How did you guess that?"

"I'm rather strong for experience, myself. But a girl doesn't get so much chance."

"Quite as much as a college professor."

"Maybe. I wonder why you are telling me about it, Professor Gifford."

With a certain conviction he answered: "I think you are to be trusted. If you aren't, I'd better know about it now than"—a brief pause—"later."

So much was implied in the final word of this astonishing speech that she turned to study his face. (How keenly blue his eyes were, burning with a cold fire under the black brows!) "What does that mean? What is there—later?"

Composedly he answered: "I don't know. Do you? Something."

He was taking for granted—accepting, rather—an understanding between them, built up out of a multitude of significant trifles in the past term; involuntary meeting of their eyes in classroom, a queer sort of excitement which she tried to repress whenever she asked him questions, an almost imperceptible emphasis upon his brusque greetings when they met on the campus; something which she had been nervously impotent to keep out of her manner toward him on the rare occasions of their social encounters at formal college functions.

At once he began to talk to her of political events, of a rare-book auction which he had been attending, of the changing standards and values of the younger gen-

eration (she was surprised at his sympathetic if somewhat cynical comprehension of girl-psychology), and presently of the people of their common environment, etching them with acid incisiveness. She would like to have said, "And what about Sylvia Hartnett?" her vanity, already stimulated by these confidences from the reticent professor, craving a more satisfying food. But "Giff" ended with quite a different person.

"You are a friend of Sara La Lond?"

"Yes. In a way."

"I am specially interested in that girl."

"I should hardly think," she began and stopped because he was smiling at her with an irritating assumption of understanding more than she meant him to understand. The smile did not alter his neutral tone as he added:

"Not as I might be interested in you. Is that what you were thinking?" (She flushed sharply, but made no answer.) "Hers is a fine mind. Most of you girls are floundering morons or intelligent fussers. ("Thank you," said Sylvia, finding her voice. "You're welcome. I should place you in the latter category.") "La Lond has, I should say, a genuine passion for learning. Unhappily this does not always exorcise more instinctive passions. Do I make myself clear?"

"I don't know. I think—surely you're mistaken about Sara," faltered Sylvia in amazement.

"I fancy not. An eager, hungry mind. And the body strong and vital and insistent with its own specific hungers. Where the two conflict there is likely to be trouble."

Sylvia recalled the all-night pacing in the room oppo-

site. A grim, remembered phrase—was it from the Bible?—something about “wrestling in travail of spirit,” took on new significance, new possibilities of tragedy in her mind. But Sara! With her ascetic standards, her life of studious devotion, her fierce athleticism. Could Giff be right? How should he know?

“Are you so well acquainted with her, Professor Gifford?”

“Hardly at all. But I happen to know her antecedents. We came from the same manufacturing town originally. I fancy she is a lonely soul, here. It might be for her best interests to be less alone.”

“Speaking in the interests of morality, Professor?” asked Sylvia, very demure.

“Morality be damned! I am interested in scholarship. If La Lond wins the Alumnæ Fund as she should, she may go on and do something worth while. If she could do better work by being immoral—though I don’t admit the invidious distinction in the realm of mind—then I should advocate immorality for her. Quite possibly it would be the best course.” Again his dry chuckle. “What a flutter in our dove-cote if my abominable sentiments became known. Good-by.” He was gone like a magician’s evanishment. No further word of that future which he had so calmly assumed.

Sylvia had told her roommates the whole conversation about Sara, and part of it about herself, with reservations of the more intimate approach. They were enchanted. A flirtation between one of their number and a “faculty” was a real tidbit to their stunted appetites for sensation, especially when the other party to it was the hitherto insusceptible Giff.

"We must hope for the worst," was Starr's pious comment.

The worst, or, indeed, any further development was slow in coming. Teacher and pupil met each other thereafter only in the midst of crowds. He had made no move to see her alone, nor had he communicated with her when she went home for summer holidays, as she had rather expected. Had he decided to let it drop, deeming it not worth the risk? Perhaps it wasn't. But Sylvia's irritation at this complete non sequitur became almost an obsession. It did not help greatly that, when classes were resumed, she became conscious of his eyes often upon her. Expressing what? Sardonic amusement, his characteristic attitude toward his pupils? A message? Rather it seemed to be restlessness. Said Starr firmly:

"*Are* his intentions dishonorable, or is he deceiving our fondest hopes? You must go after him, Syl."

So one day Sylvia fabricated an excuse to stay after class, and found eight other fabricators, which was below rather than up to the average of those who derived a surreptitious thrill from a semi-private word with the sternly picturesque idol. Doggedly Sylvia waited them out. When she and the pedagogue were alone she put her formal query on some point of the lesson.

"Is that what you stayed to see me about?" he asked.

She felt herself quaking a little, a discomfoting sensation for the usually self-sufficient Sylvia. "No. I really wanted to speak to you about Sara La Lond."

His thin smile appeared. "Why lie? Is it worth it?"

Wrath gleamed in Sylvia's eyes and glowed beneath her skin. "I'm sorry I stayed."

"I'm not. You are quite improved when angry. I must study to rouse you."

"You don't need to study to insult me."

"Nonsense! We're beyond that already, you and I."

"We're not beyond anything."

He ignored the contradiction. "You're annoyed because I haven't made opportunity to see you. There have been reasons. Are you going to New York soon?"

"I don't know when I'm going," was the pettish reply.

"As you please. . . . Anything else, Miss Hartnett?"

Suddenly her eyes appealed to him. "I didn't think you'd be—this way—to me," she murmured.

"Stop it! I'm not—and you know it." His tone was quiet, but a dark flush had risen in his face.

There were footsteps outside. One of the lovelorn, hopefully returning.

"Thank you, Professor Gifford," said Sylvia as in formal acknowledgment of information imparted. But her voice was husky, and her nerves were humming like tautened wires, responsive to the thrill of her unexpectedly revealed power to stir him. An apothegm of Starr's got on her wires and was borne to her brain: "Some people are just made to make trouble for each other—and there you are!"

There, indeed! But where? Sylvia had not the vaguest idea where she now was with Gifford. Somewhere, at least. No longer in misty space. So much had been gained by her venture.

At home, her chum was waiting for her. "Well? Did he explain?"

"Yes. No. Partly."

"You look rattled. What happened? Did you make him crawl?"

"Giff? Crawl? I should say *not*."

"I don't know what's the matter with you," said the disgusted Starr. "I think you're a perfect smooch."

Undisturbed by this withering characterization, Sylvia grinned. "I didn't altogether get the worst of it." With which her friend had to be content.

Gwen Peters came up to them. "Going to the Junior Costume this evening?"

"Sure."

"Come around to the room afterward for a little, quiet party."

"What's up?"

Gwen explained that she had become possessed of a bottle of not-too-filthy red wine and already had the remains of a flask of brandy, donated by the family for medical use only, out of which, with the addition of lemon, sugar and mineral water she would back herself to produce a blend of superior potability, definite authority, and negligible aftermath. Starr and Sylvia held swift wireless consultation and assented. It wasn't much in their line, nor in Gwen's either, for that matter, but—— In vacation or at week-end house parties the principle and practice was to swallow anything and everything alcoholic when, as, and if offered. On the college premises it was different. The Sperry attitude toward drink in general was "After all, it's kind of silly." But the monotony of term-time was already

corrosive upon their spirits. The "costume" was sure to be dull. Might as well hit it up a little, afterward.

There was an eleven o'clock late permission for the event. Gwen slipped away at ten thirty. The two juniors from Twenty with Helen Quigg, the fourth invited guest, all in the scantiest apparel, for costume revels are always a contest as to who can come the closest to nudity and still "get by," followed a few minutes later. They found themselves in a devastated area in the midst of which Gwen impotently raged. Somebody had made away with the materials of the revelry. Now, informal borrowing is a common practice in all women's colleges, and stealing is by no means rare; but to take a housemate's liquor is the ultimate depravity. Wrath inspired a furious thirst in the four. Where, a few hours before, they had languidly accepted the invitation and would have been about as well satisfied not to, now their spirits craved stimulus and the revenge of which it was the symbol. Drink they must and would have. They instituted a canvass. Nobody had, or at least would admit to having any of the desired contraband.

"What about Balaam?" asked Helen Quigg.

For some reason, lost (perhaps fortunately) in the mists of antiquity, the head janitor of Sperry is always known as Balaam. The present incumbent was young, frisky though married, and acted unofficially as campus bootlegger. Hurling themselves into long coats they went to his house and cautiously but insistently made their wants known.

"Sorry to disappoint you, girls, but I'm absolutely out."

They lifted up the voices of lamentation. "But we've got to have some. Positively *got* to."

"Oh, well, if you feel that way about it," said he sympathetically, "I know where I could get some, I guess."

"At any price."

He scrutinized the group, now huddling in their wraps, for it was raining. They looked safe. There might even be the prospect of a "party" with himself included. "Any of you want to go along? It ain't far."

Wild, but guarded cheers. All of them, it appeared, wanted to go. It tickled their sense of adventure, of rebellion against the adverse fates, this excursion to a mysterious bourne in the illicit hours. For his part, Balaam would rather that only one of them had volunteered. He had visions of a jaunt of exciting possibilities. Well, he'd asked them all and now he'd be game. He ran out his rickety old Dodge, buttoned in all the curtains tight against detection of his precious load, and they were off, heading out of the village by the shortest route.

Two miles of main road and nearly a mile of muddy country byway were covered before the car came to a halt in front of a sinister enough looking house with hair-lines of light forming mathematical angles about its shaded windows. In a shed at one side were the dim forms of several lightless cars.

"How about a li'l drink inside?" invited their conductor.

"Is it safe?" asked a doubtful and unsteady voice, with an intonation suggesting that very little encour-

agement would be needed. It was bitter cold in the car.

"Safe for you as for me."

This was undeniably true. Also it was in the nature of a challenge to their gameness. Gathering their coats about them the girls followed Balaam to the door where, after a colloquy carried on in loud whispers on one side and low growls on the other, all were admitted and seated at a corner table. There were a dozen men in the lamp-lighted room, all of whom looked like respectable enough citizens, and half of whom were more or less drunk; and two women who appeared to be neither drunk nor respectable. Balaam ordered five Scotches. The girls found them strong, bitter and comforting.

"Have another round?" he invited promptly. He was feeling very set-up over having in his charge this bevy of youthful beauty, which the other men were looking at curiously and with envy. Starr and Gwen declined. Helen, who had a hickory head, said she'd stay with it, and Sylvia said she'd stay with Helen. But her head was of a softer material than hickory and before the second Scotch had more than begun to tingle through her nerves, she suspected that she had made a mistake, albeit a not unpleasing one. She felt dizzy and exuberant and songful and was possessed with a sharp desire for fresh air, a great deal of it, and at once. She stood up. Her coat flapped open.

"Show-girls, by God!"

A man at the adjoining table had caught a gleam of fancy costume and bare flesh. He rose and lurched forward, presenting himself with an elaborate bow.

"Commovernaveadrinkwizzus" he proffered in one continuous performance of hospitable syllables.

Sylvia wavered on her feet. He thrust an arm around her neck and downward. The shock sobered the girl. She shoved him violently back and he was prevented from falling only by the interposition of his companion, who had also risen and come forward, and who now feelingly rebuked him.

"Mushn't inshult ladies. 'Tain't done. On b'half of friend I offer my apologies. Have drink with *me*."

"Get out, quick," muttered Balaam.

The four girls, seriously alarmed now, made for the door. Several male figures interposed. "No, you don't!" they exulted.

"Le'm go if they want to," said the upholder of the proprieties. "Never int'fere with a lady's wishes." In consequence of which noble sentiment somebody swung on his eye. Instantly the fight became general and enthusiastic. A side lamp went down with a crash. In the dim light of the remaining one, Helen Quigg failed to see the advent of a bottle which took her behind the ear and knocked her over. She at once scuttled under the table and thence to the doorway. Starr got a flying fist, presumably intended for some one else, on her chin, and had the satisfaction of landing a by no means despicable punch on a flushed and vastly amazed countenance which loomed up over her. Gwen and Sylvia were already near the outer door which Balaam had yanked open when with a wild crash the other lamp bracket came down. Total darkness superseded the twilight interval. Through it sounded thumps and bumps and impacts of heavy feet on the floor, pantings

and gruntings and monosyllabic expletives. It was a mess and no place for a minister's child!

Balaam had got clear and, with the triple intention of saving his skin, his reputation and his job, had made for the car. As he stepped on the starter a wave of femininity swept out of the night and poured through the car doors. The driver vaguely thought he counted four; it would have made no difference; he wanted only to get away from that place.

The feminine figures huddled together in the black rear of the car until it had reached the outer road, then Starr disentangled herself and climbed into the front seat beside Balaam. In the rear Gwen and Helen became gradually aware of a foreign and disturbing element which presently defined itself as perfumery of a cheap and robust brand. Nothing of the sort had ever pertained to any of their lot. A paralysis of horror seized upon them as a voice, equally alien, said with a sigh of relief:

"Oh, *Cheezis!* I'm glad to be out of there."

"Who are you?" said Helen wildly.

"Where's Sylvia?" shrieked Gwen.

"She isn't here."

"We've got to go back," barked Starr.

"Not me!" announced Balaam with a passion of sincerity.

"Didja lose one of yer party?" asked the stranger.

"Yes. *Where* could she have got to? How did we miss her?" Helen began to cry.

"Cheer up, dearie. She'll be all right. The fellers we was with are perfect gents. They'll look after her. One's an alderman."

The car was bumping wildly over the rutted road, but could not make great speed. Far ahead a lone figure, picked up by the headlights, moved lightly and swiftly aside. Starr in the front seat sensed something familiar in its pace. A moment later she was sure. She opened the door and thrust her head and half her torso out.

"Sylvia!" she yelled. "Back there. . . . The road house. Sylvia Hartnett."

Patterson Gifford raised his heavy cane and waved it. Then she saw him turn and run back along the road.

CHAPTER IV

WHEN Gifford reached the road house he found Sylvia standing by a tree in confidential colloquy with a bulky, mild, and intoxicated man. Within doors matters were quiet.

"I'll take you right home," promised the man.

"But I'd rather walk."

"You'll be perfly safe with me."

"Please let me walk."

"Go' my car right here."

"I don't want to ride."

Gifford stepped into view. "Good evening."

"Oh!" said Sylvia and began to giggle inanely.

Drunk—thought Gifford without surprise or disgust, though perhaps with a little unconscious disappointment.

The man of bulk stared a little. "Good evenin'," he said.

"Are you ready to go home?" Gifford asked the girl.

"Home?" repeated the man doubtfully.

"This is Alderman somebody; I don't know just who," said Sylvia.

"Spanhover," supplied the other. "Pleased to make your uckh-acquaintance."

"And this," Sylvia improvised brilliantly, indicating Gifford, "is my uncle."

"Thassa good one."

"Thank you so much for helping me get out."

"'Sall right. Any time—help a lady."

"Good night"—from the girl. "Good night," repeated Gifford pleasantly.

"*Wait* a minute," said the alderman with stress.

But the pair were already half way to the gate, leaving the third party to the transaction (which had begun to seem to him peculiar and probably wrong somewhere) trying to make up his mind as to the next move. The latch clicked behind them. Simultaneously there was a click in the brain of the deserted one, waking a sense of deception, betrayal, and outrage. Mildness dropped from him, as a discarded garment.

"Hey!" he roared in the voice of a bull-elephant. "Wherejeh think yeh're goin' with that girl?"

"Run down the road and keep on running," Gifford bade her.

Sylvia ran. But when she had covered a hundred yards and found herself alone, she looked back for her rescuer. He was standing near the gate. His formidable stick swung gently in his hand. The alderman, who seemed to be parleying with him, but from a cautious distance, whirled and made a slightly curving rush for the house. At once Gifford set out up the road. She heard the door bang open and the bellowing voice:

"Hey, you fellers! Cal! Jim! This guy is runnin' away with my girl. Come out and help me catch 'em."

"Keep going," ordered Gifford at the girl's elbow.

He set the pace at a brisk trot. Behind there was apparently some debate. At least, there was delay. Sylvia, still in good wind from her vacation's dancing and with her head now quite cleared, felt her excitement

turn from dread to thrill as she raced along. When she began to pant he touched her arm, slowing her down to a fast walk. She glanced at him. His face was set in silence.

"Aren't you going to speak to me?" she asked.

"Yes," he returned in the tone of one who calmly enunciates an eternal and incontrovertible principle. "You are a damned little fool."

Which seemed to close that topic of conversation. Through the damp, thick air a faint whirring reached their ears. He interpreted it.

"They're after us."

Two angrily staring lights appeared half a mile back of them.

"Can you make that wood-lot over there?"

"Of course."

They crossed a plowed field, heavy with mud in the low places, now floundering, again making easier pace. If they could hide among the trees the pursuit might go past. If not, she wondered what his course would be. Hers was plain; to take orders. She huddled behind a large maple. He stood over her, peering out. She heard him curse once under his breath. The car slowed down, halted opposite them.

A man wallowed out—another—a third. Three to one—no; three to two, for Sylvia would fight. Exultantly she knew that she would fight without flinching, by his side. If only she had a weapon, even a hatpin!

Gifford took off his heavy woolen mittens. In her ignorance she supposed that he intended to fight in his bare hands—and in that chill air!

"Give me a ribbon, a string, anything you have."

"What for?" she asked, interested.

"Do you think that you would enjoy being man-handled by three drunken brutes?" His voice was deadly.

"No."

"Then do what I tell you and hold your tongue."

She fumbled in her underclothing and drew out a two-foot strip of blue satin. One upon the other he slipped the mittens over the great wen in which his cane terminated. "Pull them down," he directed. She did so. He bound them neatly in place, now and again glancing up to mark the progress of the pursuers. They were making heavy passage of it across the field.

Gifford fumbled in his pocket and slipped an open jack-knife into her hand. "Stab for their bellies if they get to you," he said. She nodded. He looked at her scrutinizingly, patted her once on the shoulder, and walked out to meet the men. With terror for him she realized that he had left his only weapon, the club, propped against the tree.

"What do you want?" His quietly peremptory voice came clearly to her.

"Where's m' girl? Whad you do with her?" the bulky man asked in return. He was quite reproachful about it as one who has had his trust in human nature basely deceived.

She heard Gifford state in an informative tone, "You gentlemen are off the track. There's the road."

"You be damned," retorted a rancid tenor.

One of the men, a broad, ape-like creature, seemed to be maneuvering to get in behind the lone figure. Sylvia was just about to cry out to him when she saw him turn

and run, easily outdistancing the pursuers who staggered on the uneven surface. Having reached the tree where she sheltered he resumed his cane and stood out a little. Taut and ready in the open space, he looked, the girl thought, as slender as a snake and as dangerous.

"Remember," he said to her in a quick aside. "Low with that knife if you have to use it."

"Right!" She felt a devastating excitement in which fear played but a small part.

The advancing force entered the patch of trees and deployed. "There she is," piped the tenor, "hidin' behind the tree."

They came on. The ape caught up the dead branch of a tree. Holding it in both hands he began to weave about in prize-ring fashion, circling the slight and still figure with the cane. What happened next or how, Sylvia never could have testified. A quick leap, a pass, a shattering impact of wood upon wood, followed by a softer impact, and the weaving figure toppled with a sort of shocking deliberation and lay quiet.

The alderman stood, appalled and helpless, until the padded knob struck up under his jaw with a "clup!" He crumpled and lay as inert as his companion.

The piping tenor began to shriek in animal terror of death as its owner ran zigzagging back toward the road. He had no chance. Sylvia shrieked, too, in involuntary pity and dread for him. The swift black figure was after him, was upon him, like a hawk skimming the ground for its prey, had struck him down, and ignoring the girl's pleas, beat him relentlessly into quietude.

She shrank from the victor, as he returned to her, breathing hard. "Come," he ordered.

"You've killed them," she whispered. "You—you *beast!*"

It seemed as if her arm would be torn from the shoulder-socket with the violence of the jerk that plucked her from behind the trunk upon which she had leaned in an access of blind sickness. Half dragged, half running she traversed the field.

"Get into the car."

"I don't want——"

"Get into the car!"

She crawled in. He put on speed until they had rounded the first turn. "Don't move from where you are." He jammed on the brakes, jumped out and ran back along the road. His expression had lost something of its strained grimness when she saw it again. "Two of them are all right," he condescended to report. "They are helping the other across the field. I hit that hairy abortion a little harder than I intended. He was dangerous until I broke his arm." After a moment he asked, "Are you sober now?"

"I wasn't drunk."

"It doesn't matter. Pay attention to what I am saying. If there should be any serious results this is our story; you were drugged in the house and carried into the wood-lot. There you came to enough to scream, and I heard you as I was walking along the road." With a change of manner he snapped: "Whose car were you in?"

She did not answer.

"Do you hear me?"

"Yes. I shan't tell you."

"You'd better. Was it a college car?"

Obstinate silence. "Well, I know, anyway." Unexpectedly his low, dry chuckle followed. "I expect you'd have used that knife if they'd got you."

"I'd have done as you told me."

"I'll give you credit on one point; you didn't cry."

"I never cry."

"Stern, old, hard-bitted Puritan stuff, eh? You are Puritan, aren't you—by ancestry, I mean?"

"Yes."

"The name indicates it. And that effect of physical reticence that you have. Long generations of self-denying, joy-repressing, abnegating New Englanders and all that sort of thing. And now the chilled blood is warming into revolt. That's why you do silly, childish things like this escapade."

"I did it because I wanted to."

"Admirable reason! You fairly coerce one's respect. Because you 'wanted to' you risk expulsion and involve me in a messy adventure that may cost me my job."

"I didn't ask you to come after me. . . . Oh, I'm sorry I said that."

"You ought to be. You also expressed the opinion that I was a beast I believe."

"It was horrible, the way you beat that man down."

"Yes? Well, I wasn't slapping people on the wrist at that particular moment." He lapsed into silence for a mile. When he spoke again it was quite impersonally. "This car I shall leave downtown. It is a garage car and the men were out-of-town sports who may be content to let well enough alone. We should know by to-

morrow whether they are going to keep quiet or make a scandal that will furnish a tabloid holiday of print. You'd better get out here."

"Good night," she said. "It would be silly to thank you."

He regarded her inscrutably. "A little," he agreed and left her.

An emotionally relieved trio of depressed desperadoes welcomed the lost one in through an obliging ground-floor window.

"We were almost maddened," said Starr. "Giff found you, then."

"Yes."

"You needn't be so filthy monosyllabic about it."

"I'm tired out."

"Come up to Gwen's room. She's got some hot chocolate. *And* a little stranger, quite worth meeting."

"I'm not coming up yet."

"Not coming up? What——"

"I'm going to wait."

"*Oh!*" said Starr. Conjoined in a single comprehension the others retired.

Sylvia crouched at the window until she saw the slender and stern figure coming along the path which led past Trumbull to his house. She slipped out and stood before him. Patterson Gifford stopped. "Well?"

"I'm sorry."

Her contrition inspired no acknowledgment from him.

"Are you off me for life—Giff?" she whispered, greatly daring.

"Don't be a fool twice in the same evening."

Had he moved an imperceptible inch nearer to her,

waiting? Were those strong, nervous hands that had struck so adequately, so brutally in her defense, yearning toward her? She could not be sure. But of this she was sure, that at a word, at a breath she would have sprung to him and held to him. In the penetrating glare of the headlights she had incongruously noted that his face was dusky with the day's strong, bluish growth of beard. With a desire that both astounded and exalted her, she craved to rub her soft cheek injuriously against the harsh stubble of his tyrant's chin.

Puritan blood in revolt, indeed!

Upstairs, amid the steam of a potent perfume, the chance guest of the evening was gigglingly regaling her new friends with the delights of life under the bright lights, which, she wanted to tell 'em, was sure the Queen's beans! Sylvia, joining the group, was neither repelled nor convinced. On the first-hand evidence cited, her opinion, in which the others concurred when they came to discuss it, was that a demi-professional career of the flesh was a pretty dull sort of life. She gave them a brief account of the battle in the snow. The guest resolved her difficulty about the muffled cane, expressing great admiration of the defender's strategy.

"Easier to knock a man out and less damage done than with the bare wood," she explained expertly. "It's like the bare fist; no good to finish a guy with."

In the morning the lodger, to their surprise, rose betimes, demanding a cold bath, and looking as fresh as a field flower and about as pretty after her ablutions. Being thwarted in her wish to pay for her night's rest she went her unknown way with warm thanks and opti-

mistic assurances that they didn't need to worry; there wasn't going to be any fuss, as long as nobody was croaked, and as for Dick (the ape) he had an iron jor and couldn't be hurted.

Her forecast proved sound. The enemy of a night withdrew, as it were, to the remote fastnesses of their own private existences whither none cared to pursue them.

CHAPTER V

BACK to Suite Twenty at the close of a hard morning, Starr Mowbray sniffed the air with surprised nostrils.

"Floral offering," she observed.

She followed her nose to the window sill. Six heavy-headed and luscious roses nodded in the pitcher which was doing emergency duty as a vase.

"Syl!" called the sniffer.

A grunt from their bedroom indicated (or was so meant) that Miss Hartnett was busy with other affairs.

"Who's the passionate suitor?"

"Huh? Haven't got one in stock."

"Explain me then this gay garland, girl."

"The flowers? They're Vee's."

"Whoops, dearie! Our kitten's caught a mouse. Who's the gent?"

"That ain't no gent."

"No? She didn't buy 'em for herself, did she?"

"Olga Tremwich sent them to her."

Starr frowned. "I thought that was all off."

"Apparently not."

"What are we going to do about it?"

"Search me. She doesn't know what it's all about."

"Neither do we. Not for certain."

Sylvia shrugged. "I don't like that person," she stated. "And she doesn't like us."

"What does that prove?"

"Oh, proof! That's something else again."

A babble of voices sounded on the stairs and Verity danced in. "'Lo, you two owls."

"What are you looking so het-up about?"

"Travers of the Collegiate Caravaners is coming to rehearsal. Maybe if I make a hit with him, he'll take me barnstorming." She danced before them like a gnat in a sunbeam.

"You'll have to be on your toes."

"I think you've got a swell chance."

Sylvia brought in the pitcher of roses and elaborately deposited it at the amateur's feet. "On account," said she. "You'll be smothered in 'em on your triumphal tour."

"More likely to be carrots. They do small town stuff, on the fall tour. They say it's the best training." She dipped her nose into the blooms. "Aren't they lovely! Olga sent them to me."

"Do you see much of her?" asked Starr bluntly.

"At rehearsals, of course. She's playing opposite me."

"'S nice!"

Verity looked up quickly. "What's the matter?"

"It ill beseems a hard-boiled virgin," explained Sylvia lightly, "to go in for schoolgirl crush stuff. You're in college now, kid."

"Olga's always been nice to me," said the freshman simply. "She wants me to visit her next vake. They've got an awfully star-spangled place on the Cape. I've seen pictures of it."

"Is she trying for the Caravaners tour?"

"No. She's only been cast for men's parts, and of course men play those in the Caravaners. I'll tell you who is going, they say. Gallant Gale."

"The conquering Sid? He's Nixie's newest."

"She can have him."

"Atta big-hearted kid!" said Sylvia derisively and Starr added: "Didn't know you knew the Gallus One."

"I don't. And I don't want to if half what they say about him is true. I'll bet he'd be *poisonous* to act with."

"What's inflamed your mind against the lad?" inquired Sylvia curiously.

"Oh, I dunno! They say he expects every girl he looks at to fall for him. I hate these beauty-boys."

"Well, you haven't made the Caravaners yet," pointed out Starr.

"No, and I don't know that I'm so crazy to, if he goes along. They say he's putting up part of the money for the tour and he wants to play juveniles and that'd make me play opposite him and I *know* he'd paw. I hate being pawed."

"Our chee-ild is getting blasé!"

"No, I'm not. But this experienced-young-man-of-the-world stuff gives me a chill. Why don't they keep it for the night-clubs? I'd rather have a girl to play opposite. They don't paw you. I've got a class. See you at dinner."

The other two looked at each other. "She certainly doesn't know what it's all about," said Sylvia slowly.

Sylvia, energetically toweling in the communal bathroom at the end of the hall next morning, heard herself

addressed from the wash-basin in tongue not understood of the peoples.

"Bobbie—booble—blooshle—blish."

"Meaning me?"

"Yeah," spluttered the other through a dispersed fog of tooth powder in which loomed the imperfectly assembled features of Helen Quigg. "Sheen Nickshee?"

"Finish your teeth and then try it."

"Nixie," explained the ablutionist, "has got a swain on the way."

"I suppose that's front-page news!"

"He's coming for the week-end and bringing a blind drag that Pink had taken on but Pink is back on a history written and can't make the grade. I think Nixie wants you to handle him."

"I guess that makes me an Elk!" was Sylvia's derisive answer.

"I'd rather take a blind off'n Nixie than any girl in the House except maybe Starr. I don't know how she snares the men but she certainly does."

"I'll telegraphic reporter and he'll tell the public she does."

The other was attracted by the esoteric phrase. "Is that the newest gag?" she asked doubtfully. Fresh slang, hot off the vaudeville griddle, is prized at Sperry. "I don't think it's so good, at that," she disparaged.

"This week's show is rotten," admitted Sylvia. "Maybe I'll look Nixie's proposition over."

Elsie Nichols was the mystery of her time and the despair of rival prom-trotters. She was a weedy, blowsy, high-strung, bow-legged, languid little troll, homely of face and quaintly proportioned, but her eyes,

liquid brown beneath the storm-black brows of temperament, were charged with witchcraft, and when she spoke, Circe sang and the lure of soft laughter hung in the air. Intimates she had none. Friends were few; enemies—whom she regarded with an indifference more wounding than disdain—not so few. She was not precisely of the inner circle of Trumbull, so despotically ruled from Suite Twenty, but she played around with them when she played with any one. Mostly she was a lone wolf and men were her prey and her hobby. No other girl in Sperry was so much talked about, guessed about, surmised about.

It was characteristic of Nixie that she seldom went to other people. They came to her. Having come to her, they usually did what she wished, for she possessed the cold strategy of manipulation for her own ends. Sylvia, however, was going to her for ends paralleling but not identical with Nixie's. And first she returned to consult with Starr.

"Where's young Vee?"

"Gone to the Libe."

"Starr, it's time our chee-ild began to use the advantages that Nature gave her, and to find out that men were made to be useful to the higher sex."

"Step down off the platform, Syl, and tell me all about it."

"Nixie's got a scheme to saw off a blind drag on me. I'm going to saw our Verity off on her."

"What for?"

"Experience in a sound school. Nixie is elected tutor to the Infant Class. What do you think?"

"I guess it's all right."

"Then I'll go over and break it to her."

Elsie Nichols was sitting cross-legged amidst the confusion of her small and extremely messy room, mixing instantaneous chocolate, in lieu of the breakfast which she seldom attended, and making languid selections from a large assortment of masculine mail.

"Throw Shiftless and Makebelieve (two of a quartet of rag dolls) off the chair and sit down," was her greeting "Shut up, Trotsky." This last to a frenzied canary. "Just had a wire from Gee-Gee."

This was more interesting than Sylvia had anticipated. If Gallant Gale, that figure of almost mythical romance at Sperry, was in the game it might be well worth playing. Was it possible that Nixie, the troll, had made him already?

"How is he?" inquired the polite-for-reasons-of-policy visitor.

"Pickled, I should think," replied Nixie impartially. "Judge for yourself."

The telegram, dated the previous day, read: "My spirit craves your subtle hand and my heart yearns for your voice full stop arriving town to-morrow A.M. if gas lasts halt bringing along friend hyphen of hyphen childhood hyphen days check also sample from old oaken bucket pause remember it is always springtime in the hearts of the innocent, and be kind to all dumb animals including yours gee gee."

"Sot!" muttered Sylvia. Her bolted breakfast was still rebellious within her and she was feeling sour. "Who's the other?"

"Name's Loyster. He's a friend of Pink's. Pink says," she continued in an ingratiatingly frank voice,

"that he's no marvel and doesn't rate much higher than a kind soul to bum free meals off when you're in New York. But he's tractable and has a lovely nose. Will you take him?"

"No: I won't; but——"

"Why couldn't you say so and save all this soul-sweat?"

"Don't pull any of your peeves on me, Nixie," warned Sylvia coolly. "I can't, but I might find somebody who would."

"Who?" It was Nixie's turn now to be suspicious.

"Verity Clarke. She's as pretty as a bird in a tree."

Nixie promulgated a word of deep wisdom. "No girl is pretty until she's found out that she's pretty, and your kid hasn't. No style, either."

"We'll array her for the sacrifice."

"Does she know anything?"

"Not much. I want her to see your work" (Nixie had that coming to her!)

She put on an innocent air. "I can tell her how to play safe of course. But she won't need it with this lad."

"He sounds awfuller and awfuller."

"Don't you believe it. He's perfectly presentable and just the thing for Thirteen. (This being the room where there was dancing after dinner on Saturdays and where men could be danced with or shown off.) "You're sure the kid isn't dumb?"

"Not a bit. Her trouble is that she doesn't know what it's all about. She's always lived by rule at home. Mustn't go to the movies without Mother. Must be in

at ten o'clock. Motor with a boy alone? Oh, shocking! No nice girl does it. All that sort of prehistoric tosh."

The dark pools of Nixie's eyes welled up with amused apprehension. "Why, she'll be a raging lion! I know what these repressed kids are like when they get loose."

"She isn't loose. And she isn't going to be. Just show her a touch of life."

Nixie sighed. "Send her down."

"Now, I wonder whether that's all right," reflected Sylvia, a little uneasy, as she went to break the news to Verity.

The freshman threw a near-fit. "But I don't get along with strange boys. I don't know how. I get rattled and then I giggle."

"Don't be a slob. You've got to snap out of it some time."

"But I hardly know Miss Nichols."

"Miss Nichols! For crying out loud! Who d'you think she is—the dean?"

"What'll I wear? What'll I talk to him about?"

"Tell him how grand you think Amherst is."

"But you said he was a Williams man."

"Therefore that'll start something. Tell him he's got dreamy eyes—nose, I mean. Look up into his face and purr. Watch Elsie Nichols work; every move a picture! For Heaven's sake let's get some color onto you." She caught up a lipstick and did some free-hand sketching on the other's protesting face. "There! You look less like the deserted wife in 'Way Down East' now. Come along." (To herself she added: "I do hope she hasn't drawn a drip.")

Nixie was lolling on an unmade bed, though it was

noon when Verity Clarke arrived. A half-hearted wriggle, indicating that the hostess would rise if she possessed the energy, caused three books and the sheets of an unfinished theme in bacteriology which was Nixie's one really zealous interest in college, to slither to the floor where Vee politely retrieved them.

"Tha-anks," drawled the troll. "I haven't been feeling too well lately." She never felt "too well lately" and seldom began studying before luncheon, although she had energy enough to spend practically every weekend at some far-distant house-party, football riot, prom, or other festivity, circumventing the rules by methods known to her resourceful mind alone. (The child—so she thought of Verity, though she herself was short of nineteen—was unusually pretty, and would serve her turn all right.) "Have some fudge."

Vee helped herself to the sticky confection. Nixie took twice as much. Looking about in the wild and somehow buoyant confusion of the room, the visitor made a startling discovery. Of the scores of men's photographs with which the walls were lined, practically all were upside down. Was this symbolic? Perhaps Nixie read her mind. She laughed softly.

"Love 'em and leave 'em," she observed. "I turned all those down but I've never turned one up again."

Nevertheless there were a few which had not suffered the indignity. One was a face of pride and mirth and beauty, set a little apart from the others and vaguely familiar to Vee. She recalled later that she had seen it in newspaper reproductions.

"All waiting to join the Turn Verein," observed the troll cynically. "Even 'Gallant' Gale." Without being

told, Vee knew which one was Gale. The sobriquet "Gallant" so fitted the face and expression.

"My man?" she asked and blushed.

"No;—mine—until further notice. You're going to be crazy about yours," she pursued with smooth and false assurance. "He's a winner. Pink's throwing a cat-fit because she's out of it, and she'll have a worse one when she finds out who drew him."

"What'll I do with him?" asked the freshman nervously.

"Just play him. Don't you know anything about *anything*?" she added impatiently, catching the look of bewilderment on the still childish face.

"I've played around with men, a little."

"What's your line?" queried Nixie becoming brisk and business-like.

"Line?" Verity looked doubtful. "I don't know that I've got any."

"Of course you have. Every girl is on parade with a swain. Maybe you do plain and fancy languishing."

"I don't believe I'm the languishing kind," smiled the other.

"It isn't so bad as a side-line, though. I can pull a pretty mean languish, myself, on occasions. What about sparkling conversation? A little wisecracking keeps things stirring sometimes."

"It's awfully hard for me to talk to a man I don't know."

Nixie gave a little movement of impatience. "Then how are you going to get to know 'em? Go right into a neck? Is that the idea?" She felt a malicious desire to overbear this infantile innocence, which, after all,

might be only a bluff. "I suppose you do neck?" she concluded, with purposefully brutal directness.

Verity flushed. "No. I don't like it." Curiosity spurred her courage. "Do you?"

To the direct question Nixie returned an indirect answer which, however, was adequately responsive. "Most girls, if they go out with a boy-friend that they like, naturally neck him a little. You've got to keep 'em interested or some other female will snitch 'em away. You don't sling the gin, I suppose."

"You mean drink? No."

"Don't begin now, in case your Harold has anything on the hip." Her big liquid eyes became shrewd, her manner confidentially impressive. "I'll give you a real tip. Bow off bootleg unless there's at least four in the party and one not drinking. If you'll look up the records you'll find that, nine out of ten cases where a girl gets kicked for the good of the college, there's a smell of booze somewhere about the proceedings. Go as far as you like, as long as the old bean is straight. It's when us sweet young things get hitting up the flask that things happen that'd tip the halo right off Althea Sperry's sainted head. Not so often as the talk goes, at that. But there have been cases. Pass me that pad, will you? I've got to crank up for Mediæval Art. The boys'll be around in a couple of hours."

Verity's succeeding classes got but perfunctory attention from her, and her half hour at gym was a complete flop. Back at the room she was taken in hand by her two elders.

"What'll she wear?" asked Starr.

"My little green model and your new black hat."

"Got any decent stockings to go with it?"

"No. Sue has. I'll borrow them." Sylvia darted around to Sue's room. She was out, but Sylvia borrowed the stockings just the same and returned, triumphant. "Her own shoes'll have to do. Sue's are kind of busted out at the side." The two friends fussed and worked and dabbed at their subject and finally pronounced her ready, "Though I wouldn't give her anything better than a B minus on that hat," said Starr pessimistically.

"She's pretty enough to get away with anything," returned Sylvia as the two Juniors went out. "But I do not trust that Nixie cat. Think we ought to stick around?"

The two, having earlier detected the warm and robustious aroma of boiled cabbage in the air, had decided that their stomachs were too weak to withstand a meal of that character and that dining out was in order. Starr said: "That's asking too much. But we might go down the front way and probably get a look at the lad."

Downstairs in the parlor they sighted Gallant Gale and his friend.

"What think?" said Sylvia after a half minute of estimate and analysis so profound and destructive that a masculine mind would have shrunk from it, astounded and appalled.

"He's good-looking enough."

"*And* knows it. The perfect type of the fatuous ass."

"Probably never been to a girls' college before."

"And'll think it most frightfully jolly."

"And aren't our customs quaint!"

"What'll you bet he doesn't borrow a bicycle out of the rack and go whizzing about the campus with gleeful shouts?"

Starr delivered the damning verdict. "He looks the type that goes in for good, clean, wholesome fun."

"Of *course* he'll want to eat in the college. That kind always does."

Starr paused, irresolute. "Surely Nixie'll stick by."

"When did you ever know her to stick by? She'll be off thicketing with Gee-Gee. He's this term's craze with her."

"Can the kid handle it alone?"

"Oh, let her go through with it. She's got to learn sometime."

Nowhere else in the world can mere man make such a show of himself as at a girls' college, and in so many different ways. One of the favorite sports of the sweet young buds of collegiate life is to surround the casual male visitor with fluttering attentions, to hang on his every word, to flatter his vanity to the utmost, to make him feel that he is a very devil of a fellow, while through it all runs a salty undercurrent of comment, unheard by the victim, but enduring in reverberant echoes for the later discomfiture of the unhappy girl responsible for his presence.

The blind drag, Mr. Ralph Loyster of Dayton, O., fulfilled the worst forebodings of the two analysts. So did Elsie Nichols. But she had her reasons. For Mr. Gale, casting an expert and conquering eye upon Verity

Clarke, had promptly decided that this freshman was a little peach, and upon learning that she was taking a part in the forthcoming play, announced that he would be found in the rooters' section. Excited more than she was attracted by his self-confident attentions, Verity glowed. Nixie's shrewd feline apprehensions were stirred; this freshman was already finding out that she was pretty, and pretty she was, exceedingly so. Nixie's hold upon Gale was still insecure. Later when she had bound him to her by those not too subtle strategies of sex which were her special talent, she could afford to take chances; but not yet. Before he knew how it all happened, Nixie had muttered to the other pair some noncommittal reference to meeting them later, and had rapt Gale forth. When last seen they were disappearing in the direction of the lake, the inference (for the wise) being that they would make a detour and come out to the main road there to possess themselves of Gale's specially constructed car, enameled in the colors of his college, leaving the other couple stranded. It was now Loyster's cue to suggest that he and Verity stroll down to the Inn for lunch. In lieu of which he sniffed the air, mirthfully stated that if there was anything he throve on it was a cabbage diet (he called it "kibbitch" by way of wit), and were men allowed to eat at the college tables? With sinking heart Verity had to admit that they were.

"Try to ruin my appetite by surrounding it with a coupla hundred pretty girls," challenged young Mr. Loyster, accompanying his words with a throaty outburst. In her stricken soul Vee found a phrase for it, "cheery guffaw."

Attracted or perhaps only startled by the strange tenor cachinnation, two girls from her corridor obeyed that impulse to stop, look, and listen; also to loiter. Vee began to perspire lightly, but she presented the boy-friend. An imploring glance from her eyes signaled the others to tag on, which they did though not wholly, Vee surmised, out of Christian charity. Immediately Mr. Loyster started in to knock 'em cold. His conversation became sprightly and provocative. He produced a running fire of wise-cracks. He hinted at a flask, not so far distant as to be unattainable. The girls were flatteringly responsive to his gayety. He felt that he was making a hit. One of the two whispered to Vee:

"Where'd you glean the campus pet?"

Campus pet! The deadly characterization fitted. Even while she would have liked to murder the whisperer, she recognized its justice.

Further along the path three seniors, spread in an uneven triangle, were tossing a fluffy ball. With a desperate certainty of fate Vee knew that there would be an overthrow, that the loathly thing would roll toward them and that her companion would, with the mixed intent of doing a gallant service and showing off his athletic prowess, plunge after it. She was even capable of imputing malignant design to the players when it happened. Joyous like a kitten, Mr. Loyster rushed after the ball, expertly scooped for it and booted it. Down the path he scampered, made another dab and opened up the shoulder seam of his too-snug coat. Straightening, he directed the quick, piercing glance of the conscious athlete at the field, picked out the

prettiest angle of the triangle and shot the ball toward her with the word:

"To *you*."

"Thank you," returned the senior gravely.

Mr. Loyster placed himself in a professional posture, humping his shoulders and setting his hands on his knees. The coat seam opened up a little more, betraying a rather blatant design in stripes and foliage.

"Shirt by the scene-painters' union," murmured one of Vee's aides.

"Put her there!" chirped the volunteer athlete, extending his hands with the fingers enticingly splayed.

The three seniors regarded him with faintly surprised eyes. They then resumed their game of catch. Mr. Loyster lowered his hands.

"I see," he observed. "You don't let us rough, coarse men into your maidenly exercises here."

The two other girls recalled a date at the Libe and left.

"See you at supper," they said, at which the flickering flame of Verity's will-to-live sank a little lower.

"When do we eat?" inquired her swain.

"You're sure you won't mind?" she queried desperately. "The food is pretty bad sometimes."

"Lead me to it!"

There was a late class at Stafford which they were approaching. Bicycles filled the racks, flaunting their snappy designs of "Stop Thief," "Wait for Me," "Excuse My Dust" and the like. With heart in her throat Vee had nearly got him past this peril, when a machine leaning languidly against a tree caught his eye and lighted unholy desires therein.

"Watch papa!" said the playful lad, and leapt lightly into the saddle.

Around and around he spun with gleeful shouts, waving both hands to Vee each time he passed. The class came out. Vee had a horrible bristly feeling within her that the owner of the bicycle was going to be nasty about it. Sure enough it was Ida McKay, "only Ida." Vee quivered and made a move.

"Oh, *don't* stop him. *Please*," besought Ida. "It's only *my* wheel. And he's having such a good time."

Loyster circled violently back to them, dismounted with a gymnastic leap and signified again his receptivity to food. The meal was a dull misery to his unhappy companion. All the girls in reach talked to the lone available member of the male sex, laughed just a little too exuberantly at his wilted jokes, and convinced his all-too-willing soul that his invincible personal attractions had made what was probably the social hit of the college year. How should he know that the attentions of all those sweetly ardent young charmers were bestowed upon him simply and solely because he appertained to the trousered gender and not by reason of any fatal charm in himself? As Vee led him forth, full-fed (she had hardly been able to swallow a mouthful herself) she heard behind them the derisive comment:

"That little freshman is certainly spread-eagling her bird!"

With his penchant for "quaint college customs," Mr. Loyster had absorbed the exciting information that there would be an interclass basketball game that afternoon. In fact, Nixie had told him, in the hope, well-founded, of giving him something to keep him busy.

By all the rules of decency and fair play as between girl and girl, she should have returned in time to join the others and relieve her partner, in case the blind drag was not measuring up to specifications. Not Nixie! She had her swain, and just because he had evinced interest in other quarters she had the more ardently set those passions which she called her heart, upon his conquest. With bleak forebodings of what would happen, Verity took her escort to the game.

Replete and purring, the other two H.B.V.'s returned from their off-campus meal with the pious design of dropping in at the Gym and lending social tone to the game by their presence for a half hour or so. They entered upon a scene of spiritual devastation. Time had been called between the quarters. The teams were sucking oranges and lemons, nursing bruises, listening to advice and exhortation from their supporters, explaining how they had done it or why they had not done it, and posing athletically for the benefit of the fifteen or twenty men visitors who, for the most part, exhibited the good taste of keeping themselves in the background, when a hush fell affording Mr. Ralph Loyster his golden opportunity. Ignoring the plucking hands of Verity's imploration, he leapt upon a chair and raised his arms in the manner of a cheer leader.

"Now! One and all! A long, soft coo for Old Sperry!" And the cynical laughter of his self-applause rattled the windows.

"Oh, my God!" groaned Starr.

"Nixie ought to be *slain*!" from Sylvia.

"The kid'll never be able to live *him* down."

"A complete drip."

"The drippiest ever."

"*All* wet."

"The time has come for heroic measures."

Together they jammed through the crowd. Verity, scarlet and almost speechless but still game, presented them. Sylvia drew the Freshman aside while Starr entertained the youth.

"Where's Nixie?"

"I don't know."

"Hasn't she shown at all?"

"No."

"She's left you to carry *that* alone?"

"Yes."

"The dirty little *toad*. Is he as awful as he looks?"

Verity's small, sniffling catch of the breath might be the beginnings of the deluge. "What ever'll I do with him?"

Five minutes later young Mr. Loyster learned several things that he had not known before. He learned that the charming freshman had been summoned to report to a committee for some past dereliction. He learned that his appearance had so favorably impressed these two calm and superior beauties (class, they had! commented the penetrating Mr. Loyster, in admiring self-communion) that they wanted to take him on a brief tour of the campus. The tour being very brief, he learned something invented by the two for the occasion, that a new rule closed the sacred precincts to males between five o'clock and supper. It being then 4.46, Mr. Loyster went forth still rejoicing in his popularity, and covenanted to return for the evening.

Verity was found prone upon her bed. "I'll never hear the end of it! Never!" she wailed.

"The end is not yet," said one of her companions oracularly.

"There's an account to be settled with Miss Elsie Nichols," said the other.

"I never want to see her again," declared the freshman with excusable violence.

"*We* do."

"And we propose to see to it that she shows up at Thirteen this evening. Loyster is having supper, and taking you there."

Verity uttered a muffled yell.

"He'll *adore* Thirteen. Cheer up, we'll be there."

"How do you know Nixie will come? She never does."

"We've had a little conversation with Miss Nichols."

"And offered her the presidency of the Bum Sports' Club if she doesn't come through."

"Also I've had a private talk with Mr. Sidney Gorsline Gale," added Starr.

"What about?"

"Your waxing pash for him. You may not know it, but you've developed a yearning yen for that lad."

"I haven't. I don't like him. He's got such loud eyes," complained poor Verity. It made no impression upon the relentless fates as impersonated by Mesdames Hartnett and Mowbray.

"You've got to play up."

"I'll giggle," threatened Verity, and giggled.

"If you do," came the solemn warning, "you go forth forever from the company of the Hard Boiled Virgins. This is feud stuff and damned serious."

"What do I have to do?"

"Heavy fussing."

"I don't know how."

"He'll show you."

Verity became sulky. She looked like a disgruntled flower when she sulked. "I won't like it a bit."

"You don't have to like it. You just have to do it."

Full primed for another exhibition by the priceless Loyster (invitations to the dining hall show had even been extended to outsiders), Trumbull House was disappointed. True, the dubious hero was there, but he was in charge of the two most competent man-handlers of their time, and none cared to test the defenses of the formidable juniors of Suite Twenty. Something was in the air, though: no doubt of that. But the nature of the warfare was still undeveloped, beyond the fact that Nixie had put over a drip on the inexperience of the little Clarke while carrying the Prince off to one of her many lairs, and that the other two Hard Boiled Virgins had rallied to the rescue. Doings were in prospect.

Disgruntled, but a little daunted by the intervention of Starr and Sylvia, Nixie brought her swain to Thirteen from the Inn, where they had dined by no means abstemiously, as late as she dared. Pausing cautiously at a window, they looked in upon a scene none too reassuring with Mr. Ralph Loyster in the major rôle. Within the crowded limits of the room he dipped and glided, pranced, side-shuffled, and swooped. His collar had wilted. His shirt stood forth in weird heraldry from the rent seam. He was red, gaspy, sweating, spent, and puffed with a monstrous pride. The girls

were cutting in on him in endless succession with the murderous design of wearing him down. He was fair game for a form of hazing of which Verity was meant to be a co-victim. By the ethics of Sperry it served her right for bringing in such a trove.

Gale was rather appalled. "Let me out of this."

"Whatever did you trail along such a snit-face for?" whispered Nixie.

"Couldn't find any one else that could get away." Gallant Gale was one of those lions who must always have his attendant jackal.

Nixie considered. "I'll have to dance with him. It'll make things look better. Come along."

"I'd rather be here with you."

"Later," she whispered. She lifted her face, and he bent to the quivering hotness of her lips.

Sidney Gale was the biggest game in Nixie's long list of conquests. The son of a millionaire mine owner from the far West, he was the newspaper model of what a college sport should be. His car, his clothes, his late night parties in New York, his \$25,000 a year allowance (a college mate, scion of the fourth richest American family, was getting along nicely on \$2500) and above all his personal beauty and joyously unconscious swagger, were topics of the Sunday journalism to which he occasionally contributed personally signed (but not personally composed) views on life, education, and what-is-our-youth-coming-to? He was charming, shallow, good-humored, generous, greedy, passionate, quick-witted, prone to easy kindnesses, and grossly selfish. At a fraternity house-party he had referred to Nixie as "that queer little toad from Sperry" in a voice of

such alcoholic volume that she had heard and (with a silent vow that she would take her revenge by "making" him) smilingly taxed him with it. Before the week-end was over he was in thrall to her physical spell. Nixie knew, with the art which her greatest-great grandmother had direct from the Serpent, how to rouse masculine expectancy and keep it unfulfilled but hotly hopeful. She had asked him to come down to see her, and what her words had not promised him, her farewell kiss had. Here he was, and Nixie was so crazy about him that, she told herself, it might even be real, this time!

Gale was game. Even with the horrible example of Loyster before his eyes, he let himself be drawn into that "femaelstrom" as Nixie dubbed it. Instantly he was engulfed. His golden reputé was known to all the girls: he was a hero of modern legend: not a Galahad, certainly, but perhaps a Launcelot or a Tristram. Nixie meantime had cut in on the hard-sweated Loyster. Watchful ever, she became aware of teamwork developing about her Prince. The girls who were cutting in were all of the close corporation run by Suite Twenty. They were "passing" Gallant Gale as expert hockey players criss-cross a puck down the ice; Mowbray to Merrick to Clarke; then Hartnett to Quigg to Peters, back to Mowbray again; then in quick succession La Lond (how came the toilful scholar there? Nixie asked her troubled brain) to Forsythe to Dahl to Hartnett, always edging over toward the side door. The watcher found her view shut off, and when she looked again, he was gone.

CHAPTER VI

AT the outer doorway Starr delivered Gallant Gale over to the waiting Verity with a look which said, in silent, savage eloquence: "One giggle and you die the death!" But Verity did not feel gigglesome. With this paragon, this darling of the tabloids, this reputed wrecker of feminine hearts she felt the ease of indifference. They strolled out and into another hallway leading to the "engaged parlor," which they found empty. Gale opened fire.

"I hear you're the whole thing in your Dramatic Club."

"Am I? I hadn't heard of it." Verity smiled up at him. There was no conscious lure in the smile, and certainly no confusion. The experienced fusser speculated as to the best and readiest line of approach. He prided himself on being a quick worker, but this was perhaps a case for caution.

"I'm something of an actor-lad, myself," he informed her modestly.

She looked him over with flattering interest. "You rather remind me of John Barrymore in a way."

"Do I? Well, I'll take a chance. Which way?"

"You've got ears just like his," she murmured.

He took it with a grin. "That's why they made me president of our Dramatic Club."

"Oh, *are* you? Isn't that swell!"

"What about getting up a dual meet? I'd like to play opposite you. Bet we could pull some snappy love-stuff together. Maybe I neglected to tell you, but you sure have wrought some ruin in my tender heart, child."

"Have I?" Verity felt that this, considered as a response, was less than might reasonably have been expected of her, but she could not figure out on such short notice what her sponsors in the adventure would probably have said in like circumstances.

"I'll admit it." His hand reached for and enfolded hers. She looked down at it interestedly, attentively. Queer kid.

"I didn't think I was going to find anything like you here."

"Did you 'find' me?" she said significantly.

He flushed and laughed with that ingenuous frankness which he had found almost invariably effective. "You're sore about Ralph Loyster. That wasn't my fault. He tagged on." (Correctly she guessed this to be a lie.) "Ralph isn't so bad when you get used to him."

"You're supposed to be very alike aren't you?"

He stared. Was this innocence or a "string"? Certainly the kid was a winner. She had the cool, close-folded beauty of a bud. Nothing to stir a man's blood like Nixie. And yet—a fellow could fall for her easily. But *she* wouldn't fall easily, not for any old comer: perhaps not even for Gallant Gale. However, he was fairly embarked upon the enterprise now. No retreating for Gallant Gale! One of the girls had thrown over Verity's shoulders a sweater snatched,

haphazard, from the rack, and she had drawn it around herself. As she leaned forward from his arm which had slipped back of her, he noticed lettering across the back of the garment and read it aloud, amusedly.

"'No Parking Here.' Snappy little motto," he commented.

"It isn't mine," said she hastily.

"You mean the motto isn't?" he laughed.

"No, the sweater isn't."

"I could pick a better line than that for you from the road sign."

"Could you? What is it?"

His eyes ran over her gracious young figure.

"'Dangerous Curves'," he said.

Verity flushed to her temples. She hated anything that made her think about herself physically. She moved away from him nervously.

"Not sore, are you—dear?" he whispered.

"No. But I wish you wouldn't say things like that."

"All right. I won't. I'll turn over a new leaf, like Adam. Know that one?"

"No."

"Adam turned over a new leaf—and there was Eve!"

"Oh!" gasped Verity with such obvious shock that Gale decided against further wise-cracking of that order. Direct action would probably serve better in this instance, though it would have to be managed with finesse.

"That's a slinky dress you've got on," he murmured.

"Do you like it?" Verity, relieved, felt herself on safer ground.

"What are these funny gadgets on the sleeve?" He

ran his fingers along her wrist, closed them upon her arm, drew it gently up over his shoulder and bent smilingly to her. Her eyes wavered—that was encouraging—and her breath quickened—good sign. His first kiss was gentle.

“You’re a sweet kid,” he murmured and pressed his lips down upon hers.

Now there are as many ways of being kissed as of kissing; but Verity lacked the technic as well as the taste for this form of exercise. She spluttered. (Starr or even Sylvia would have blushed for her!)

“What’s the matter?” laughed the other. (Had he gone too fast?)

“I don’t like being kissed that way.”

“Rats! You’re just not used to it.” (Could such things be in that day and age?) “Let me teach you a few things. I’m from Great Neck, Long Island, where the great neckers come from. Come on! What’s the harm?”

“I don’t suppose there is,” she admitted, but her trim body was stiff and unyielding as he drew her back into his arms.

“I could be crazy about you—easy,” he murmured.

“Be careful! Somebody’s coming.”

“Damn!” said Mr. Gale.

Footsteps approached the door. It was opened—Gale had closed it in spite of his companion’s protest that this was against the rules—and a voice said with slow, angry emphasis.

“Oh! So sorry to interrupt you!”

“Who’s the dark and dismal female?” asked Gale as the intruder withdrew leaving the door open.

"Olga Tremwich."

"Friend of yours?"

"Yes. No. Not specially."

"Don't commit yourself if you're not sure," he laughed. "She looks as if she might bite. What's her grouch?"

"I don't know. Maybe she was looking for me to run over some of our dialogue. She's in our play."

"Aren't you going to bid me down for the show?"

"Won't Nixie ask you?"

"Claws, eh?" But as he said it, he knew himself in error. There was no room for jealousy in the indifference of this cool, desirable slip of a girl.

She ignored the insinuation. "Why do they call you Gallant Gale?" she asked.

"Just a name the newspapers have pinned on me." He was well satisfied to let her know that he was a public character. "Listen, child. What are you doing to-morrow evening? I'm dated to go back. But if I could fix up a little conference with you——"

"Oh, no! I've got a rehearsal on."

"Well, what about to-morrow morning, then? A sunrise stroll, what?"

Desperate stuff, this, for Gale, who loved his morning sleep like a cat. Besides, he was trysted for eleven o'clock to-night with Nixie, which certainly meant being out till two or three (and might mean much else; he didn't know yet), still he could always bellycrawl the early date if too sleepy and explain that the clerk forgot to call him.

It was on Verity's lips to answer "No." But what would her roommates say? They'd slaughter her for

having missed such an opportunity. "All right. Where'll I meet you?"

"I'll be outside Trumbull at seven sharp. . . . What about one for good-night, sweetie?"

He could not discern any more encouraging warmth in that kiss than in the others, which made him, in his spoiled soul, only the more eager. Oh, he'd be there!

Great was the exultation in Suite Twenty when Verity brought back news of her dawn-date.

"If we could only get Nixie up to see it!" said Starr.

But, as Sylvia remarked, Nixie would be more likely to turn out at eleven than seven after a night on the neck. However, a hint could be dropped to Ida McKay, which would be the next best thing and a sure method of getting the thrilling news into circulation and back to pain Miss Elsie Nichols. For, to have a swain make furtive dates with another girl is black disgrace. The revenge of Suite Twenty for the shame put upon the youngest of their sisterhood would be complete. But would Gallant Gale show up?

"Our man doesn't set foot through the ropes till he's in the ring," announced Sylvia.

At seven-five Gallant Gale was at the tryst, feeling very virtuous. Starr and Sylvia plucked the (for once) sleepy Vee out of bed.

"Lemme alone," she whimpered.

"Get up! Your boy-friend's waiting."

"Let him wait."

"But he won't. He'll get sore."

"Let him go back, then."

Verity freed herself, dove into bed, buried her sleepy face in the pillow. The two conspirators stared at each

other. Gallant Gale, the hero of a hundred affairs, the darling of adoring worshipers, turned down. Ditched cold! And by a novice!

Grand! Oh, grand!

The net result was that Gale departed, raging. Nixie, equally furious, upon learning what had occurred, was more than ever bent upon his subjugation at any price, and hated Verity. Verity instead of being the laughing stock of Trumbull was the heroine of the day.

Before a week was over all this had ceased even to be of importance to her in comparison with a far more exciting event. Henry Travers of the All-Collegiate Caravan Players, who had dropped in on rehearsal to help the coach, had come to Miss Clarke after having reduced her almost to tears by the tart persecutions of his criticisms and corrections, and asked her to try out for their ten-day fall tour. The only drawback was that Gallant Gale was also definitely booked for the trip.

CHAPTER VII

EXTRA special! Special Extra! The big news was quietly disseminated to choice spirits in Trumbull House. Three quarts of a meritorious sauterne had returned from Boston in Roxy Ann Merrill's suitcase, the after-dinner gift of an elderly (*i.e.* thirty-four) "uncle." White wine in the Sperry code, while a festivity, is not regarded as serious drinking. The clans were to gather at midnight, in Suite Twenty and hold high converse over the bottle.

At the hour the room was well filled. Seven girls sat on the floor; the remainder of thirteen occupied the furniture. Paper cups held the vintage, and the talk, like most eventually cosmic discussions, began with local gossip. Recent escapades were detailed and re-enjoyed. From a dim corner a voice recalled an episode no longer recent.

"That road-house fuss three weeks ago has certainly had the muffler put on it." (Starr nudged Gwen Peters.)

"Balaam was in it, all right."

"So was Giff."

"Don't believe it."

"Why? D'you think he's so pure?"

"No. He isn't pure, but he isn't *merry*."

"Think he's ever been seduced?" drawled some one with humorous intent. "By any of the girls, I mean."

"Doubt it. He plays the rules."

"Well, I wouldn't blame him, married to that weeping willow. She's certainly the human whimper."

"Nixie might have some information."

"Nixie isn't here. This is her necking hour."

"Did she ever try to make Giff?"

"*Did* she! She'd try to make Prexy if she thought she could put it over the old dear."

"Oh, shut up!" This was Gwen Peters. "Prexy's something else again. Who wants to drag his name into this kind of drivel?"

"Anyway, Nixie certainly majors in men," said Roxy Ann and at the same moment Verity, near the door, warned, "Some one's coming."

"It's me." The low, vibrant contralto identified itself. Elsie Nichols, the subject of the immediate discussion, had an uncanny knack of turning up at the dramatic moment. "Just found your note, Starr. Thanks for the ad, Roxy Ann. If I do major in men, I don't flunk my subject." This was in the nature of a dirty dig, for Roxy Ann had suffered the humiliation of having an attractive Harvard Junior whose attendance at the Prom as her guest had cost her thirty dollars in hotel bills, snatched out from beneath her very and rather too prominent nose, by Babe Protheroe, who had little to commend her except unlimited faculties of acquiescence. It was never wholly safe to rouse Miss Elsie Nichols. She slouched across the floor and slumped down, a queer, squat little figure, beside the table. Somebody handed her a cup. "I'll bet you-all were girl-handling Giff," she remarked calmly.

"Don't we always?" murmured somebody.

"He certainly does possess the old S.-A."

"I don't see it." The objection came from Helen Quigg.

"No two people ever do see it in the same way."

"What? Sex appeal? That's where you're wrong. It's either there or it isn't."

"The Ultimate Absolute," chuckled "Golden" Ruehl.

"The ultimate asininity!" declared Sylvia. She felt inexplicably disgusted and angry that Patterson Gifford should be involved in this.

Instantly there was a clash of opinion, counter-opinion, argument, drawing from Starr the caution: "For Heaven's sake, shush yourselves! Our dear Warden isn't deaf in *both* ears."

Helen Quigg gave focus to the debate: "What about Babe Protheroe?"

"What about her?"

"She's got sex-appeal, all right."

"It isn't an appeal with her; it's a yell."

"She certainly hasn't got anything else."

"That's the point. She isn't pretty. She has no style and she's a dumb Dora if there ever was one. So she plays the other game."

"Can you blame her? How else would she get her a man?"

"That's right. I guess the sky *has* to be the limit with her."

"Then she's a boob," came Nixie's even drawl. "If I couldn't keep my swains on the string easier than that, I'd enter a convent."

"Look out, nuns! Trouble's coming!"

"Such a leedle geranium!" jeered another skeptic.

Starr quoted in an elegant and stilted tone a movie caption of the current attraction: "Her young cheek had never yet known the warmth of passion's kiss."

"Oh, well, if you're talking about necking."

"We weren't. We were talking about the Protheroe method."

"Necking isn't the same."

"It's a preliminary."

"You make me sick."

"The men think it's a preliminary—or hope it is."

"That's their lookout."

"Just the same, the whole business of attraction is ninety per cent physical," insisted Nixie.

"A hundred."

"Don't believe it. An imbecile could be beautiful as a dream, yet any of the boys we know would run, shrieking, from her."

"Because an imbecile wouldn't be beautiful as a dream. She couldn't."

"Besides, I didn't claim that sex-appeal and beauty are the same. They aren't. I only said that sex-appeal is mostly physical."

"That comes of majoring in biology."

"All right, biological, then."

"Biological, maybe," agreed Starr. "But it's mental as much as physical. If they can make you laugh, they can make you love 'em. That's been my experience."

"I wonder why it is," speculated Verity, "that when a bunch of us gets together for a gab-fest, the conversation always gets around to sex."

There was a rush of voices to tell her.

"Why not? Think it isn't nice?"

"What else is as interesting?"

"It's the only big adventure left to us."

"The last outpost. Every other kind of experience is free and open."

"The fascination of the 'Verboten' sign." (Sylvia looked quickly toward the murky corner whence Starr's voice had issued.)

"It's the Great Revelation."

"Or not—as the case may be."

"Well, it's so advertised."

"But not guaranteed."

"Did any of you ever think," Sara La Lond's definite and arresting voice cut through the jumble, "what a queer discrepancy it is that most of us are women in body four, five, six years, before we're supposed to be women in mind and know what it's all about?"

Some one delivered the damnatory verdict: "Victorian stuff."

"It still holds, though. And that's where our troubles come in."

"Rats! What I didn't know when I was fourteen, they wouldn't dare print in a tabloid."

"Well, a girl's got a right to know." Gwen became oracular, with the emphasis of one who expounds a pet theory. "I believe every girl has a perfect right to find out for herself what it all means."

"Oh, if you're going to put it on the high moral ground of one's duty to self-development and all that."

"Maybe you think that's what makes girls take the Fatal Step—if any. Well, it isn't."

"What is?"

This elicited another scattering fire of answers.

"Curiosity."

"Just one drink more than you meant to take."

"Middle-of-the-term boredom." (Starr's view.)

"Being cooped up week after week with so many girls that men become irresistible."

"In other words, nerves."

"Don't fool yourselves. It's the old primeval pash that does the trick. Cupid-stuff."

"Celia's right. Ask the girl that's tried it. Nine cases out of ten, she'll tell you she was crazy about the man."

"That's only her excuse."

"I don't care about the *why*. It's the right to find out things for ourselves that I want," insisted Gwen Peters, who was born to rebellion as the sparks fly upward. "A girl's body is her own."

"Even when her parents are paying to feed and clothe it?" questioned the practical Roxy Ann.

"No credit to them. The law compels them to do that," Sylvia pointed out.

"Of course there's the question of age," Gwen qualified. "Personally I think a girl ought to wait until—well—say until——"

"She's asked," suggested Pink Delavan mildly.

"The age of consent," put in Nixie with a grin.

"The first gray hair."

"Years of discretion."

"It's a long, long trail."

"Some of 'em ought to wait till they're a hundred."

"Some of 'em'll have to!"

"No girl *has* to."

"Wait till you're sure you're in love, then go ahead."

"Wrong!" declared Nixie. "It's letting yourself fall in love that makes all the trouble. That bunch over at Balch Hall have got the right idea."

"You mean about men over forty?"

"Or more. The uncle game."

"I didn't suppose that men as old as that were—" well, that they——" Verity's voice trailed off.

"Don't fool yourself! It's the danger-age for men."

"But not for the girls that play them. The Balch idea is that if you're going to take a lover you'd better take an old one. Not *too* old, of course."

"Why?"

"Well, it's the safest. They've usually got money enough to give you the best kind of a good time, and finally—this is the most important—you aren't as likely to fall in love. Though I've known it done."

"The father-complex. Vide Freud."

"But I think it would be too horrible," said Verity, her face hot even though the dimness hid it, "unless you were awfully in love with the man."

"Sweet little Victoriana!" came a derisive murmur.

Sylvia came to the rescue. "That isn't being Victorian. That's just being plain *clean*."

Starr's suave and naïve voice offered a solution. "Well, you can be temporarily in love."

The talk became more excited, more intimate under cover of the darkness and the stimulus of the warmish wine. The familiar formula, "I knew a girl who—" flew back and forth, usually cloaking personal experience or opinion. Said some one—it sounded like Golden Ruehl's voice:

"A married woman I know told me that it was only luck or protection that kept any one from—from stepping out if the circumstances were just right."

This elicited a rather shocked outcry of protest.

"Any girl that feels that way ought to go out and run around the block three times," proclaimed Roxy Ann indignantly.

"Run around the lake ten times," amended Elsie.

"And then jump in." Pink Delavan capped the prescription.

"It isn't what you feel; you can't always help that. It's what you do that counts," contributed Starr thoughtfully.

"Oh, well! Nobody *does*. They take it out in talk."

"What d'you mean, nobody does? D'you think conversation is Babe Protheroe's limit?"

"Babe's different. I meant none of *us*."

"Oh, of *course* not!" But the whispered drawl from the dimness was too obviously sardonic.

"Well, who is there here that any of us would suspect?"

"We wouldn't say, if we did."

"And they certainly wouldn't let the rest of us know."

"No. Not right out in the open. But, listen; girls." It was Pink Delavan and she was excited. "Let's try it out, right here."

"How?"

"Take a ballot. A secret one."

"Sure! So there'll be no reason for anyone lying."

"We can do it this way," announced Gwen Peters, who had an organizing mind. "Every girl gets a slip of paper, and a pencil. She marks her slip and folds it."

"Marks it how?"

"With an X for experience."

"Or with a V, I suppose," supplemented Celia, "if she's in the vestal class."

"That'll do, all right."

Lights were turned up while preparations were completed, and turned down after the slips were distributed. There was a little nervous giggling; self-consciousness asserting itself. But for the most part they were silent and rather serious, for there was a genuine interest in the experiment, beyond mere prurient curiosity. Starr Mowbray acted as teller. She bore the empty candy box to the table and carefully sorted the small squares into two piles, all but one, which she put by itself. There was a graveyard stillness when she made her announcement.

"Out of fourteen here, thirteen have turned in slips. There are three X's and ten V's."

"What's the extra one?" Half a dozen joined in the query.

"Somebody with a distorted sense of humor," said Starr drily, and emptied the symposium into the scrap-basket.

Instead of general talk, quiet whispers passed from girl to girl. Verity was the one to bring the topic back into the open.

"Would it come out the same way in the whole college, do you think?" she said in an awed voice that appealed for refutation.

"One in four!" came a wondering murmur.

"Not quite."

"Near enough. Too near."

"Our set doesn't really represent the college at large, though."

"Do you mean we're pretty rotten?" came a fierce challenge.

"No; I don't. We're not like the Balch Hall crowd but——"

"Wonder what *their* batting average would be?"

"All that Gwen meant, when she said we weren't representative, was that we're more independent than the rest; more experimental minded."

"If that's what you call it!"

"I'll bet there aren't twenty girls in the whole coll that aren't straight," declared Elsie defiantly.

Nobody took it up. Talk languished. The wine was all gone.

"Let's forget it," came the suggestion from Sylvia, and a general murmur assented. Soon the party broke up.

"What was on that slip?" asked Sylvia as soon as the three Twenties were alone.

Starr fished them all out of the basket, and handed her roommate the curious one. It bore the symbol, "?" Sylvia stared at it. Then she stared at something else. In her class in Mathematics Three one girl was famous for the neat precision of her letters. Sylvia had just identified a familiar and unmistakable X, curved like a Greek letter Chi.

It was Sara La Lond's handwriting.

Said Starr: "What does any one expect to prove by that stuff, anyway?"

"Don't you think they told the truth?" asked Verity quickly.

"I did," said Sylvia. "But that was no stunt."

"But—three out of thirteen. Wow!" said the Freshman.

"If you ask me, *I* think some of 'em were boasting." This, scornfully, from Starr.

"On which side?"

"On the X side, of course."

"Why would they do that?" Verity's wide eyes were the wider for a sweet perplexity.

"The sophisticated pose."

"I wonder who put in that question mark," mused Sylvia, "and what on earth she meant by it."

"Josh," was Starr's impatient verdict.

"Maybe she didn't know which letter to put down," suggested Verity.

"Rot! A girl would know whether or not she'd been on a sleeping party, wouldn't she?"

Verity threw her first bombshell. "I put down the question mark."

The others stared, or rather glared at her. "You! For the sake of a sick fish! *Why?*"

"We-ell, I might have put down a V, I suppose. And then again——"

"Is our chee-ild a blithering It? Don't you know whether——"

"Well, I've slept with a man; that is——"

"For the love of *Pete!* Then, if you have, why not be square and put down your X?"

Verity blushed deep pink. "Because I couldn't qualify. I'm still Class V."

"That's making virtue a pretext for cowardice,"

said Starr contemptuously. "The man ought to have beaten you senseless."

"It wasn't that at all."

"Then what was it? Go on. Shed it!"

"Don't laugh, then. I'll tell you." She gave forth her narrative in little nervous, laughing jerks. "It was on the train. Coming back after vac. The sleeper was full. I doubled up with a townie of mine. We had lower six. It was darn cold and not enough bedding. I woke up in the middle of the night and went to get a drink. The train had stopped. When I got back it was moving out. Very slow and quiet. Everything still. I crawled in. There wasn't much of the berth left. I nudged Myrt over when I'd crawled in. Then I got an idea. I said, 'It'll be warmer if we sleep spoon fashion. Turn over.' The train began to get up speed and make a lot of noise. I wasn't sure she heard me. Anyway, I snuggled up." Verity giggled; the others were charmed, ensnared, thrilling to that invincible romanticism which is one of the triumphs of femininity over modernity.

"I think I really fell asleep. Then it wasn't so warm. Myrt was turning over to speak. Only, it wasn't Myrt's voice. It was a man's."

"Oh, grand!" from Starr.

"Grand? It was awful. I was petrified. He said: 'Don't get rattled. Keep quiet.' I could keep quiet, all but my teeth. They were chattering. I didn't dare try to answer. I'd have just squeaked like a mouse. He said, 'If you make a noise we'll both be in a hell of a jam. I know this is all a mistake, and I wouldn't recognize you if I saw you to-morrow. So you don't

have that to worry about.' Wasn't that *dear* of him? 'What's your berth number?' he said. I hissed 's-s-s-six' like a scared snake. 'Cheer up, kid,' he said. 'You'll be all right. This is seven. But don't cross right over. You might be seen. Go to the wash room and stay ten minutes. Then count three berths on your right and get in. You're a game little bird.' He gave me a pat on the shoulder and I got out. I'd like to have kissed him, he was so sweet to me. But I thought he might misunderstand."

"Quite possibly," admitted Sylvia. "Then in the morning, I suppose——"

"Nothing."

The others looked blank, frustrated of a vicarious sensation.

"He must have got off before nine, when I went into the dining car."

"And no more, alas! my breaking heart?" quavered Starr.

"When I reached the dining car I nearly had a fit for fear I'd recognize him——"

"Or wouldn't," put in Sylvia.

"Well, yes: maybe."

"But how could you expect to?"

"That's just it. It couldn't be by listening for his voice, for that had been only a whisper in my ear. I looked for somebody that I thought ought to look like him; somebody very frank and manly and nice. Every man in the car must have thought I was trying to start something. The head waiter came up. He fussed around. I was on the verge of perishing, thought he had a message. He didn't say a word. When he went

away I saw two spoons at my plate—tied together—spoon fashion. And that's all."

"It can't be all!"

"How'd they get there?"

"The only thing I could think of was that he'd tipped the waiter to put 'em there for a josh."

"Maybe he was there and had you spotted all the time. What'll you do if he shows up some day?"

Verity, teetering in the doorway like a butterfly on a flowering stalk, turned to them a face of mischief and mirth. "What can I do? I'm fatally compromised already, aren't I?" She dropped an elaborate curtsy and for exit gave them Nerissa's line: "'I'll have that cleric for my bedfellow' . . . Good night."

CHAPTER VIII

"'Lo, Harve."

"Hello, Jim."

"Bin t' th' show?"

"What show?"

"Didncha know Risley Centre was on the theayter map again? We gotta swell buncha one-night standers doin' business inside."

"Don't excite me. Is it East Lynne or Uncle Tom?"

"Nothin' like that."

Jim Bascover, mechanic, stage hand, and head scene-shifter of the Risley Centre Auditorium took a bite of sandwich and a sup of milk from his worktime supper, spread on a rock in the lot at the rear of the town auditorium overlooking the lake.

"Society stuff. Lissen."

Through a high rear window, opened to admit whatever breeze might be wandering in palliation of the unseasonable October heat-smother, floated a clear girl-voice: "But I don't understand that kind of love."

"Then you never will." (A man's heavier tones. "That's a movie beauty-boy, that guy," commented Mr. Bascover.)

"I never want to."

"Bet she gets a hand," presaged the authority in matters theatrical, and as the event justified his prophecy added: "She is sure one slick kid."

"What are they, cheap barnstormers?" asked the other in negligent and not too guarded accents. The girl who had just made her exit and had kept on going for a breath of fresh air, overheard and paused at the door. She could not see Jim Bascover's grin but she heard his reply.

"Not so bum, either. Want to meet some of 'em?" He was not without pride in his official privileges.

"I'm hardly dressed for society, thanks. Just out of the woods and honing for my little bed." His lank frame, stretched in its loose, rough clothing. "Good-night, Jim."

"*Wait* a minute."

The urgency in the Bascover voice was hardly needed to check the other's retreat. The girl had stepped into the open and was drawing deep-savoring breaths of the night's fragrance. The woodsman stood blinking.

"Hey, Miss Clarke."

She peered with close-drawn lids into the dimness. "Is it you, Mr. Bascover?"

"Sure. You was wishin' you had a canoe or boat or somethin' to go on the lake."

"Oh, yes!" she said softly.

"Make you acquainted with Mr. Westfall. Harve, Miss Clarke. He might help you out."

"Are you a boatman?" she asked doubtfully.

"If he ain't," cut in the ready Mr. Bascover, "they ain't no sech thing's a boatman on Lake Risiquara."

"I'd like to take a boat for an hour or so," said the girl.

"He'll row you. Unless he's feelin' too tired. Be you, Harve?"

Mr. Westfall bestowed a secret wink upon his friend. "This way, lady," he invited in professional tones. He led the way to the lakeside, settled her into the stern seat of a smart looking cedar craft, pushed off, swung the bow outward and poised his oars. "Where to?"

"Anywhere."

"Anywhere is nowhere."

"Very well; around that point, then."

At a modest estimate, "that point" was five miles distant. In the misty night and to an unpracticed eye it looked less than a mile. The boatman rolled up his sleeves and sent the boat through the little ripples with a long and seemingly easy stroke. His fare leaned back and drank in the silence. She was having a luxurious time. She had need of quietude and loneliness to free her spirit, for she was feeling messy, soul and body. Gallant Gale's persistent love-making had decidedly got on her nerves; that hot and sticky evening in particular the kisses which she could not avoid without throwing out the action of the play had inspired her with virginally murderous feelings toward the whole masculine world. In this category she did not reckon the oarsman; he was merely the minister of her need, though, indeed, something about his voice as she had first heard it, seemed hardly in character. A moment later her doubt returned upon her with added circumstance, as the outcome of an impulse of kindness on her part.

"Don't you want to smoke?" she had asked.

"Yes."

He lighted a stubby pipe. In the flare of the match she got an impression of a face younger than she had

inferred, lean and tanned and alert and characterized by a sort of hard humorlessness, lighting in her mind a lively, curious, and not unpleasant misgiving as to what she was doing alone on a lake with a total stranger of this particular kind, sensations by no means such as would logically be aroused in a young amateur actress by a person of the opposite or any other sex to whom she was about to pay fifty cents an hour. Inconsequently—or so it appeared to her—there came into her mind a surmise as to whether the Unknown of Lower Seven mightn't be expected to look like that. She rather wished he would!

Something in the long, steady sweep of the oars suggested a distance pull. Moreover the goal did not seem to draw noticeably nearer.

"How far is it to the point?" she asked suddenly.

"About four miles, now."

"Won't it tire you?"

"Yes."

The matter-of-fact affirmative made her giggle. She was quite sure that her companion was grinning inwardly and that it was a nice, reliable grin. "Let's not do it then."

"All right." He let his oars trail.

"What are you doing it for?" she queried curiously.

He declined the opening. "The usual rates."

"Fair enough. But we have to go somewhere, at that rate."

"It's your party."

"Isn't that an island over there? With the light on it?"

"*En-tirely* surrounded by water."

"We might call on them."

"You might."

"Wouldn't they be surprised!"

"No."

"No? Why not?"

"Well, they just wouldn't. You might surprise them some ways but not that way."

"Then they must be funny people. Do you know who lives there?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"I do."

"You? Why?"

"Why not? A fellow has to live somewhere."

"Are you a hermit?"

"No; I'm a forester."

"And a boatman on the side?"

"At your service."

A sudden wild, fantastic fancy took possession of Miss Verity Clarke and would not be denied of its hope.

"Tell me; have you ever been West?"

"Yes; and my grandmother put up her own preserves.

"What's that got to do with it?" she demanded, taken aback.

"I don't know. What's my having been West?"

"I just wanted to know whether the number seven had any special significance in your life."

"Witchcraft!" said the oarsman in semblance of wild terror. "I've got four fingers and two eyes crossed and if you try to throw your shadow on me I'll jump overboard."

"Then it hasn't." She was so patently disappointed that he sought to do something about it.

"I've got a seven-toed cat," said he hopefully. "Would you like to meet her?"

"Where is she?"

"Tending the light and waiting for me to come home."

"I don't think it would be proper," said Miss Clarke demurely, "to call on a bachelor with a seven-toed cat at this time of night.

"Are you such a stickler for propriety?"

Verity reflected. A stickler for propriety? All her life she had been, instinctively. She had never yet taken a chance. This was not because of timidity but of distaste. Suddenly the bare idea of risk, in and of itself, took on allure. She did not even formulate definitely the nature of the allure or of the risk. There were vague, misty, unexplored corners in Verity's young mind. She had never cared to think much about "that sort of thing." But was this "that sort of thing"? Was this queerly attractive and rather secretive chance acquaintance that sort of man? According to the two other hard-boiled virgins any man was, under certain conditions and upon certain provocations. What a story to take back to the two of them if she did go! With such imaginative embroideries as she might devise. Or, better, with titillating reticences, irritant hints of more to tell than could be revealed all at once—more than had actually happened, of course. For Verity possessed that innate confidence of the innocent in her own ability to preserve her innocence.

"Does the court instruct me to withdraw the question?" he asked after a prolonged silence.

"No. Answer it yourself." She leaned back, smiling.

"If you are, you're in queer company," he decided.

Verity was startled. "How do you mean—queer?"

"A third-rate, barnstorming troupe."

(So he didn't know. He took her for a professional; cheap, but still a professional! Verity was thrilled.)

"How do you know we're third rate?"

"What other kind would come to a backwoods town like Risley Centre?"

"We have to take what bookings we can get," she said meekly.

"But *you're* not third-rate, are you?" It was an affirmation of faith rather than a question. "What are you doing with that lot?"

Verity had an inspiration of gay possibilities. She could masquerade as well as he. "Trying to earn a little money," she replied in what she intended as an ambitious and uplifted voice.

"To support a widowed mother and pay your poor little crippled sister's hospital bills, I suppose." (Something wrong with that uplift idea.)

"You needn't be snippy about it. Suppose it was to help put a certain party through College."

"Oh, that's different." (So was his tone.) "How much?"

"Five hundred dollars—or—or something like that."

"Do you *know* anything about college expenses?"

"Well, I thought one could start on that and wait on tables or something to help get through."

"Brave little woman!" he sighed elaborately.

"I think you're rotten!" said Verity, and her voice trembled. (She really had gifts as an actress.)

He leaned forward across the oars. "Look here, girl; is this real?"

"Of course it's real." There was an actual quaver in her throat now but that was mainly due to the dawn of misgivings.

"All right. I'll loan you five hundred. . . . Sit *still!* This boat is crank."

"Have you got five hundred dollars?"

"Yes."

"I couldn't possibly take it." (No use! She couldn't carry the comedy any further; he had ruined her lines for her!)

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

"Then don't be a fool."

"Why should you lend it to me?" queried Verity desperately.

"Because you said you needed it."

"Do you lend five hundred dollarses to all the girls you know who need them?"

"Not *all*."

"Only the worthy ones, I suppose." Verity was beginning to recover.

"Suppose as far as you like."

Verity considered him with nervous and enjoyable speculation. Was this one of the lures of man for unsuspecting girlhood? It seemed rather too movie-picturish to be convincing or alarming; yet it had the support of long tradition. "Suppose I say I'll take it; what are the conditions?"

"Roll your own."

A gentle current had drifted them close in upon the island. She said boldly: "Is the first one that I make a call on your seven-toed cat?"

"Unless you want to get a good soaking."

Her eyes followed his glance back over his shoulder and upward. A slant of chill wind had given warning of impending change and one look at the sky aroused even Verity's inexperience to misgivings. The moon, a harried and pallid fugitive, faltered in an open space of misty gray, hemmed in on all sides by imminent clouds. They closed with a rush; Verity could almost have thought that she heard a desperate cry from the vault of heaven. The breeze wavered and, for the moment, died. Then a white whisper rushed across the surface of the lake. Above it loomed a swirling curtain.

The boat lunged forward in a brief and violent struggle against the weight of the squall, gaining the lee of the island just as the rain crashed down. Westfall vaulted ashore and held out his hands with a brusque order. As the girl stepped out uncertainly a form from the darkness flew straight at the man's throat. Verity shrieked, stumbled back against the yielding bow of the boat and would have fallen into the lake but for his quickness.

"It's only Whiskers," he said. "My cat, you know. Her real name is Tabitha. Come on."

The cat purred against his neck, a reassuring sound. But Verity had to put forth all her will power not to turn away into the blackness lest she feel herself dragged by the wrist—whither she wanted to go!

The opened door showed an interior mannish but as

perfectly ordered as a ship's cabin. There were books, pipes, fishing tackle, guns, and comfortable old furniture. The host lighted a second lamp.

"Wet?" he asked.

"Not to amount to anything." The trees had formed an effective canopy.

"Want a drink?"

"No."

"Cigarette?"

"Ye—No; thank you."

He laughed. "It doesn't commit you to anything, you know."

It was true. Or if it wasn't, what of it? She was as far committed as any one could be. As if to give point to this, a solemn clock in the corner tolled out twelve strokes. "Tactless grandpa" was his comment.

"How long do you think it will keep up?" she asked.

"No telling."

"I've *got* to get back."

"Have you?"

"Of course I have!" (Indignantly.)

"Why?" (In the most matter-of-fact manner.)

"Well, I can't stay here all night."

"Can't you?"

"You know I can't."

"Well, if you spurn my humble hospitality I don't know what I can do about it except smother my lacerated feelings."

"You're laughing at me."

"Not at all."

"Then will you take me back?"

"Certainly. At once if you say so." He opened the

door. The night roared like a ravening and thwarted beast of prey. An inrush of wind shook the lights and splattered a spray over Whiskers who resented it and said so in no uncertain terms.

"I can't get wet," wailed Verity. "If I do my throat will go bad and there's no one else to take my part. What'll I *do*?"

"Make yourself at home."

"I think I'm a little fool," mourned the girl.

"Why so? You've done this sort of thing before, haven't you?"

"Have you?" she shot back.

He seemed startled at this. "Well, as a matter of fact, I haven't," he confessed. "It's a new and interesting experience for me, the romantic abduction of a young and lovely chorus-lady."

"I'm not a chorus-lady."

"Pardon. Actress. So if you know more about it than I do, tell me the rules."

Verity began to recover more assurance and in proportion to grow obstinate. "I won't tell you anything about myself or—or anything. You can just take all the risks yourself."

He did not ask her what she meant by this, which was quite as well, for she would have found it extremely difficult to tell him. He just sat, considering her. His scrutiny came to a focus in an expressed desire for illumination. "I wonder why you picked me up."

She was justly indignant. "I didn't pick you up. You were regularly presented."

"Of course. Jim."

"Your intimate friend, apparently."

"We were schoolboys together."

"So I thought at first you really were a boatman instead of a—a——"

"Pirate," he obligingly supplied.

She gathered her forces to a show of dignified appeal. "If you really are a gentleman——"

"Oh, let's not exaggerate," he murmured, thereby spoiling that. "I've just remembered something important," he added, after a pause. "I haven't had a bite to eat since two o'clock. Can you cook?"

"Not very well."

"Then I can't marry you. Sorry to disappoint you, but I positively must have a cook in the family to spoil me. I'm an excellent cook, myself. What about some supper?"

"Oh, I don't care!"

"The condemned woman," observed Mr. Westfall taking a frying pan from a wall cupboard, "ate a hearty breakfast of ham and eggs before going, with a firm and steady tread, to her doom."

"I don't think that's so funny," returned the girl disdainfully.

"Back to the drying room, little joke; you're all wet." Expertly he cracked and delivered six eggs which set up an appetizing splutter in the pan. "Doesn't that cheer you up?"

"I'll admit it. It would cheer me more to know when I'm going to get back."

"By the dawn's early light, I should guess. Now don't look like a hunted woodchuck, *please!* I'm not a villain of one of your mellerdrammers and there is a husky bar on the inside of that bedroom door and

it's a devil of a night to navigate in." In confirmation of which there was a swish, a groan, and a shock from outside as a heavy bough came down.

"But what'll they *think*?" wailed Verity.

"Without wishing to knock your ancient and honorable profesh, I never understood that it was long on chaperonage or insisted that every lady be in by curfew."

"N-n-n-no. But——" She hesitated. For some reason she shrank from dispelling his gayly romantic illusion that she had to do with a trouper.

He looked up from his operations. "You don't happen to have a husband or anything like that in the company, do you?"

"No! I hate men."

"Thanking you on behalf of my humble sex, may I ask why?" He held a pinch of salt over the simmering dish, interestedly awaiting her reply.

"I don't know. They paw you."

The salt sifted down in a fine aspersion. "That's one method, I suppose," he reflected.

"Not all of 'em," she explained. "But—well, there's a boy in the company; he's usually cast opposite me; leading juvenile. He's always taking every advantage to make love to me. . . . That's one reason I ran away to-night."

"'You don't know what that kind of love means'; is that the idea?" he quoted, smiling.

"I know as well as I want to know."

"Cross-patch! Haven't you *any* human hungers?" He indicated the eggs, now garnished with bacon.

"I believe I have."

He lifted a lamp from the mantel and walked toward the door of the inner room. "Want to fix up first?"

She stood a moment, doubtful, on the verge of dismay, then followed him and looked about her.

"Oh-h-h-h-h!" It was an uncontrollable gasp. She was staring at a photograph of Gwen Peters on the dresser. He turned and caught her at it.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing," she disclaimed hastily.

"Have you ever seen that picture before?"

"No."

"Ah!" he said indifferently. "Then you don't know Hilda."

"Hilda!?" Too late she realized her self-betrayal.

"You *do* know Gwen, I see."

Verity shut a tight and obstinate mouth.

"Oh, well! Help yourself and then come out and tell me everything or nothing as you choose."

When she emerged he had evidently made a trip outside, for his shoulders were wet. "I'm going to ask you one question and only one. Is it really important that you get back to-night?"

"Of course it is. They'll think I'm drowned or something."

"Well, you're not going to be drowned and you're not going to be 'something'," he retorted drily. "But you may be scared."

"Is the storm so bad?"

"Bad enough, though it's letting up. But you'll have to stay here alone with Whiskers for a while."

"Why?"

"The boat is gone."

"Gone! How? It's a trick."

"For what purpose?" he asked quietly.

She looked at him intently and the color rose again in her whitened face. "I'm sorry I said that."

"When the cat startled you and you jumped back against the boat, you must have pushed it off."

"Then how are you going to get anywhere?"

Westfall had his story ready. "There's a canoe, but it isn't safe for more than one in this sea. I'll cross and come back for you. You'll be perfectly safe here. I'll be as quick as I can."

Until the door closed behind him Verity had never known what loneliness was. It seemed interminable hours before she heard his voice, triumphantly signaling his return. But when he came into the light she saw him grotesquely changed. He seemed to have outgrown his clothes, from which he protruded in ungainly extensions. Also his shirt, which had been khaki, was now dark blue flannel. He was shivering all over.

"Do you mind if I take a drink?"

"Of course not! Did you get very wet?"

"Yes. It's clearing now. We'll be all right."

"Where did you leave the canoe?"

"What canoe?" he asked absently.

She stared. "Why, the one you went in?"

"Oh! Of course. At the village pier. I wangled a boat to come back in."

He bundled her up in an old coat and took her to the place where he had beached the borrowed craft. The moon had struck through the clouds and now cast a spotlight on a rock curiously decorated. Verity,

astonished, made out first the nature of the decoration and next its significance. It was the suit which Westfall had worn when he left the shack.

"Your clothes! You swam across," she accused.

"Oh, damn!" said Westfall.

"You didn't have any canoe."

"Discovered!" he cried dramatically. "Now, if you'll get in——"

"I wouldn't have let you go. I'd have stayed here all night—a week—anything, rather than let you go."

"Don't be delirious! It's only half a mile." (This was a liberal discount.) "I've often swum it."

"But not in this icy water." She dipped her hand in and shivered. "And the storm, too. It's too——"

"If you're going to throw heroics," he said uneasily, "I'll go back to the house and let you row yourself home. All aboard!"

She sat silent and thoughtful while the wind aided them on the quick passage back. "We're playing Woodside to-morrow," said Verity when they were close to the landing. "Will you come to the show if I send you tickets?"

"Can't. I'm off to the woods at daylight. Just came in to get my mail."

"Then I won't see you again."

"No? Why not?" He ran the craft expertly alongside the float and whisked her out. Her hands were still in his as she murmured with a sort of childish awkwardness:

"I dunno. I just kinda think we won't."

"Don't you want to?"

"I do and I don't. This has been something all by

itself. Wouldn't it be grander just to let it stand by itself with nothing before and nothing after it?" As he made no response but stood looking down at her with an expression half disappointed, half quizzical, she added softly: "Good-by, boatman."

His arms were strong and close about her. At first she thought he was going to lift her back into the boat and, dizzily, she knew that she would make no struggle against it. Then terror and delight struck through her in mingled fires as her lips met his. But now she was afraid, not of him but of herself, a tumultuous, unheeding, swift-blooded self that she had never dreamt of harboring. The reaction came at once; instinctive in defense her maidenhood sought to raise a final barrier. "It is good-by. It's got to be. . . . You're laughing at me again."

He released her. "I give you warning," said he gravely. "Keep off the public thoroughfares when I come to your town."

"Why?"

"If you don't I'm liable to catch you and run away with you."

"Fair enough," she allowed gayly. "But you don't know my town."

"I've got a clew." He pushed the boat off. The oars dipped and swirled; the waters whispered as they parted before the prow.

"Boatman!"

The oars poised. "Yes?"

"I think you're absolutely perfect except for one thing."

"Tell me the fatal discount."

"Seven doesn't seem to mean anything in your young life."

"'Fraid not."

She heard the craft surge forward to the impulse of his powerful back half a dozen times, then drop.

"Oh, trouper!"

"What?"

"I've just thought. Seven is a big number in my life."

"Is it? How?"

"This is the twenty-seventh of the month," he chuckled.

"That isn't it at *all*," said Verity in disgust as she turned away. Nevertheless she threw a kiss into the night for the wind to carry on its wings.

CHAPTER IX

ANXIOUSLY posed before the mirror, Starr examined an overnight florescence on her chin. Was it? Or wasn't it?

*"Redness, soreness, heat, and pain.
Mark the advent of the boil"*

she intoned.

This was a line from Hygiene B, not intentionally rhythmic and the more highly prized for its innocently perfect scansion. Sylvia, still abed, yawned. "Too much rich, off-campus food. Try our Trumbull House Menu and Grow Thin."

Starr lifted her smooth contralto a little higher, this time in the Dining Song of the House (unofficial; words and music by Gwen Peters):

*"Swill and bilge; bilge and swill:
Pay your money and eat your fill."*

"You'll be getting all flabby and pimply if you don't lay off," warned the frank friend, adding the sugar-coating: "You've got such a wonderful skin, too. It's a slimy shame."

"What's the use of having any skin at all when there's nobody to see it!"

Sylvia raised herself on one elbow, the better to examine the other's face. "Getting nervy?"

"I'm getting dam' well fed up with this place," was the muttered reply.

Shrewd in her time and generation, the other recognized the initial symptoms. This was about the time of term when the week-end psychosis, akin to the prison psychosis of our more frankly penal institutions, manifests itself in virulent and unpredictable form. Football was over and the epidemic of house-parties in the men's colleges had pretty well died out. An early winter was compressing life at Sperry to a dull monotony. The path of duty stretched in long and straight and dusty sameness to distant vacation. When a girl feels this, everything becomes a bore, and the superabundance of unmitigated femininity a corrosive to spirit and conscience. College is a dull, gloomy, repressed grind shut in behind blank walls. The outer world glows like a vanishing hope. Men, god-like and irresistibly charming creatures, exist still, but in some unattainable planet. Why more college girls do not elope with the milkman in the intolerable aridity of mid-term is a mystery of our educational system.

Starr would have sold her soul for a thrill.

The early bell rang. Sylvia dropped back with a slothful groan. In the other room Verity Clarke was stirring about. Always an early bird, she had been specially industrious of late. There was in her a disturbing energy, a tendency to express her superabundant vitality in unnecessary endeavor, which her two roommates viewed with alarm. The rule of their

cult was to do as little as possible and still get by, and to do that little with an air of contemptuous ease, as if it were hardly worth while, anyway.

Energy in a freshman has its advantageous side, however. Verity could be relied upon to pull down the windows, adjust the heat, and get her bath over and done with before the John (the communal bath-room at the hall's end) was crowded. This was a great help. It enabled the more leisurely pair to drop back in luxury for ~~ten~~ minutes more. Starr had already regained her still warm bed with a leap that would have done credit to a frog.

"Aren't you two going to get up?" queried the Freshman, entering.

"What's the use?" mumbled Sylvia. She burrowed her bright head into the pillow.

" ' time is it?" yawned Starr.

"Half past seven."

"Grand! Lemme lay for ten minutes."

"Want a bath?"

"Angel child! I'll do as much for you some day."

When the helpful one got back looking pink and firm as a shrimp, her mates were both a-doze.

"Tub's almost ready," she reported.

There was a knock at the door. Esther Reynolds, a conscientious supporter of college spirit and hall representative on the Self-Guv, thrust in a large face with an earnest expression on it. "Didn't see you girls at the meeting last night."

"Oh, for crying out loud!" This in muffled tones from Starr, whose features were, at the moment, full of bed clothes.

More responsive, Sylvia said ingenuously: "We didn't see you, either. What was it all about?"

"Nothing special. They're just asking people to try and be in more promptly at ten o'clock and want to remind you of the fire rules against smoking in the rooms and please be sure to sign up if you're going off campus after seven and, oh, yes, Prexie wishes more people would try and attend Sunday chapel because it's awfully hard to get good ministers unless there are lots there and it must be awfully discouraging, don't you think, to come 'way up here and then not——" The conscientious voice died away as the gospel-heaver retreated into the corridor.

"Blobber, blobber, blobber, B L A H!" commented Starr, leaping to the floor with the final explosion. Sylvia from her rumpled bed contributed an equally impolite antiphony.

"Goofy, goofy-guff! But she means well."

"And isn't there something in what she says?" asked Verity.

Sylvia sat up, fixing her with a baleful eye. "What's rasping *your* youthful spirit?"

"Nothing. Only, my faculty adviser has been talking to me about making some effort to—to—well, to do something outside of just—you know——"

"Omigod!" from Sylvia, now shiveringly exploring with a long, shapely leg for a mule which had taken refuge under the settee.

"You don't think," Starr anxiously appealed to her classmate, "that the reaction from her wild life on the stage is going to turn our little pet collegiate, do you?"

The object of this dire solicitude puckered the

corners of her soft mouth. "No; I'm not. Whatever 'collegiate' means."

"It means getting fervent about good works and the Sperry Spirit and being an honor to the institution and making the Debate Team and—Heaven help you!—landing Self-Guv eventually and becoming a menace to all your suffering friends."

"A little expert fussing is what she needs," pronounced Sylvia with the air of a successful diagnostician. ("She isn't the only one," murmured Starr, sotto voce.)

"You make me sick!" was the energetic retort.

"I think," pronounced Starr with intent to tease, "that she's eating her pure young heart out for the forbearing hero of the sleeping car."

"Fur-bearing, more likely. I'll bet he's got whiskers and a meek expression," put in Sylvia.

"D'you think he'll ever show, kid?"

"I'm waiting," said Verity with her most demure expression.

"And that's the reason why you showed no human interest in Gallant Gale on the trip, I suppose," murmured Starr.

Verity said nothing. It wasn't. But she had not yet told her companions the thrilling adventure of the island.

"You've got Nixie worried," announced Sylvia.

"She'd give the ribbons off her shimmy, if any, to get Gale back," said Starr inelegantly.

A plaintive and angry voice down the hall shrilled out, "Whose tub is this? Because if somebody doesn't come, I'm going to——"

"*Mine.*" Starr snatched an armful of bath-robe, soap, powder and other appurtenances, and with towels between her teeth and incipient murder in her eye, limped for the open on one naked foot. "And I'm coming right away. Don't anybody *dare* touch it!"

"Well, hurry, will you?" demanded a dishevelled figure in the John doorway. "I want to make breakfast, too, and they're all full at the other end."

Starr returned to Twenty, refreshed and fit, passing Verity in the hallway. Five minutes to dress. She couldn't make it.

"Save me a place, will you?" she called. "Flakes and two cups of coffee." (Which was rank optimism.) "And eggs, if they're boiled." (Which was wild absurdity.)

Sylvia, the champion three-minute dresser of the House, had gone. On the door was a note to take back some books, an overnight loan, to the library. Starr was justifiably indignant. "Damn! Catch me trotting over there before class. And me with nine o'clock Spanish." Nevertheless she took the books. It is well to acquire merit with your roommate.

Her particular group had permanently preëmpted the best table by the simple and effective process of insulting or ignoring any outsiders who tried to butt in. Starr's coffee (single cup and that not too well supplied) was cold from standing and the choice of fruit lay between a senile apple and an undernourished banana. She nibbled at the latter and gulped her tepid drink.

"Anybody got a chapel date who'll drop these books at the Libe?" she asked in the dim hope of shifting Sylvia's loan. Nobody had. On her way back along

the hall she yelled not wisely but too well for succor, with the logical result of getting eight more books pressed upon her—"so long as you have to go anyway"—and was giving way to despair when she caught a rumor that Esther Reynolds had a chapel mission. Only too eager to propitiate the independent-spirited and important Starr, Esther, who cherished a pathetic hope of being admitted to the clique, was run down and loaded like a camel. Thus relieved, Starr lifted up a voice of further inquiry.

"Anybody going to Span? Elsie? Gwen? Roxy Ann?"

No Sperry girl except a greasy grind or a serious thinker or a hopelessly unpopular member of the community ever walks anywhere alone unless it is a matter of vital haste. Rather will she trudge three flights of stairs to meet a girl who is going two-thirds of her route, or wait ten minutes for a companion to walk a block with.

"Ay-yah!" It was Pink Delavan's voice from the floor above. "Wait for me."

Warning bell had rung at least nine minutes before, but that didn't matter. When Pink appeared, looking a little spent under the eyes, it transpired that she was going not to Spanish but to Art, being quite ready, however, to walk around by way of her friend's destination.

"What time did you get in?" inquired the latter, interpreting the ocular symptoms.

"After three."

"Have a good time?"

"I'll admit it. But I'm getting leery about this two-

some game. Foursomes are safer for my precarious state of health, I b'lieve."

"Wasn't Nixie with you?"

"At the start only. Did you ever know Nixie to stay by a party?"

Starr would have liked to ask what happened, but one has to be extremely intimate to go that far and Pink proffered no further details, merely expressing the hope that Miss Brink wouldn't catch her falling asleep as had been the embarrassing case the week previous.

The Spanish class was sleepy and sulky. Nine o'clock classes are prone to be unless the professor is extra peppy. Starr sat, indolent, negligent, growing momentarily more bored and irritated. Well, anyway, there was the mail to be looked forward to. After class she went back to the House and headed for the milling mass at the table, groaning at the thought of submitting her nervous body to the pushing and trampling throng, and answered with relief a hail from Sylvia, who had already gathered the joint harvest and was waving in air a sheaf of letters from a vantage spot near the bulletin board. One of them had a goodly check in it from the Pater.

Instead of abating, this only added to the restless craving of Starr's nerves. She thought, though with no special relish, of cutting her eleven o'clock class in favor of a hotel exhibit of styles fresh from Kaplan & Boyle of New York, if she could get Sylvia to go with her. Not for Sylvia! She was broke. Besides, Giff was lecturing at that hour on "The Hetaira's Place in

the Social Life of Greece," a subject that no pure young girl could afford to miss. Professor Gifford was adept at keeping his classes full to the limit by a judicious admixture of sensational appeal with the duller routine.

Starr decided that to look over the style exhibit alone was too much of a bore. But, having made up her mind to cut the eleven o'clock class it was, of course, unthinkable that she should attend it, so she took some clothes to the cleaner's, fell in with a group and wandered back discussing the latest developments of the various members' love affairs, prospective house parties at Amherst, Williams, Rutgers, Princeton, and Tech, the intolerable irksomeness of college existence, the equally intolerable monotony of the college food, the rumor that Babe Protheroe had at last been caught with the goods (i.e., a man) and was in very bad, indeed; the still vaguely persistent rumor about an escapade of Balaam's, some weeks back, with five of the girls (these rumors are always inaccurate; Starr kept a close tongue), the new cast for the Dramatic, a faculty, who would be the most sprightly of the outside lecturers, a flirtatious Briton who had been on the previous year's list and would never be on another, and by the inevitable circle back to the most vital topic, the latest developments of the various members' love affairs. Again on the campus, Starr was moved by her anarchic spirit to stroll up Cigarette Walk, an insufficiently sheltered by-path popular for mildly illicit pursuits, and smoke. This failed to soothe either her nerves or her demands.

Lunch with the same old bunch she just could not

face. She accepted an invitation to eat over at Corning Hall, which was no better and no worse, only different—but not very! The table was rife with chatter about what one of the number had been doing over last week-end—girls who have not been away or had any one up will absorb with pathetic gusto the most petty details of what has occurred to a more fortunate friend, begging to know what she wore, what *he* wore, what kind of a car she rode in, what movie, even, she saw if she has done nothing more exciting—and with the merits and deficiencies of the few men who were prospects for the near future. Bridge, suggested somebody. Starr yawned and declined. Cards bored her. What else was there, though? Class sing; she couldn't be bothered with that. Might almost as well settle down to study. Damn, damn, and again damn!! She slumped back to her room, to find under her door an unstamped missive which, something told her before she opened it, was of a displeasing purport. While she was reading it her two roommates came in. Starr turned to the younger.

"Vee, didn't I hear the click of a typewriter in your room yesterday?"

"Yep. I borrowed Madge's portable."

"Sweet soul! Want to do a stunt for me while I sweat out this philos grind?"

"What is it?"

With a sourish grin and the admonition, "Use the discretion to be expected from us H. B. V.'s" the recipient handed over the note which was written in a clear, bold, conscientious hand on the stationery of the "Sperry College Self-Government Council" with its urgent slogan: "Live, Think, Work for Sperry."

Dear Starr:

There are many aspects of student life which fall under the jurisdiction of the Interclass Judgment Board. One of these is the conduct of the girls, which is extremely important, since the world judges us by the appearance and action of each girl. It is concerning your conduct that the Board has asked me to write to you. Neither your appearance nor your actions seem always to be representative of the standards we attempt to maintain.

In order that you may clearly see what I mean I will cite the criticisms which have been brought to me about you. Your gown and your dancing at the Junior Promenade were both quoted as indiscreet. Your behavior on the campus is conspicuous and so is your use of lip-stick very frequently. The members of your House find your attitude rather difficult to cope with at times. Surely these things are enough to show you why you have been called conspicuous.

Since each individual has a very definite responsibility toward this community in which we live it is essential that each one shall contribute something constructive. Your name does not yet appear on our records and I want to give you an opportunity to keep a clean slate.

I trust that no further reports of you will reach me.

Sincerely yours,

PRUDENCE CHASE,
Chairman of Interclass Board.

"Why is it," yawned Sylvia, looking up from her notes on Prof. Gifford's lecture, "that Guv officials always have names like Prudence and Constance and Faith and——"

"Poverty, Chastity and Obedience," put in the flip-pant Starr.

"Chase is a square-shooter, though, even if she is in the uplift line. You've got to hand her that."

"What shall I say to her?" Vee lifted inquiring gray eyes.

"What's your idea?"

"Why, I suppose if you apologize and say that you didn't appreciate that you were doing anything to bring discredit—to injure——"

"Stop right there! You certainly have got something to learn."

The Freshman turned a little sulky. "How do you want me to answer it, then?"

"Tell 'em to go to hell, of course. Politely, vous comprenez."

"And sign your name?"

"Oh, certainly not! Sign it 'William B. Cressline, President of Sperry College for Women.' That'll give it a lot more kick."

"That's a grand line, but you have got to do something about it, haven't you?"

Starr exploded in a full-bodied, double-barreled oath of the longshoreman variety, directed at the Interclass Board and all its works. She then snatched the irritable letter from Verity's hand, tore it to shreds, and stamped on the remains, after which she whizzed forth from the room like a rocket. The amazed freshman stared after her.

"Where's she going?"

Once more Sylvia detached her attention from her work. "Something has bust," said she portentously,

"within the sorely tried soul of that child. We shall see her again when we see her."

Vee was troubled. "Shall I go after her?"

"Not unless you want to get yourself dam' well murdered," replied Sylvia, and readdressed herself to the task of becoming a cultured gentlewoman and an ornament to her Alma Mater.

Having completed her notes in the course of an hour, she decided that a little gym work would do her no harm. At the head of the stairs she was almost knocked off her feet by Starr. Her eyes were shining. The look of tension had been superseded by one of excited resolution.

"Why the Marathon, m'love; why the marathon?" queried the innocent victim of the collision.

"Don't stop me. I'm making the 4.38."

"Need any help?"

"Oh, would you be a darling and lend a hand? I'm just on my tin ear."

"Got enough money?"

"Gibley's 'll cash the check if I can make it in time."

Sylvia accompanied her speeding classmate back to the room, where the process of a hasty packing began with the exhumation of her suitcase from its closet lair beneath a mound of shoes, books, and soiled laundry.

"What are you gonna take?"

"Oh, *anything*! Drag down my green hat from that shelf, will you, while I collect some stuff." She whirled around from a destructive tour through her dresser. "What do you think? I can't find that black satin dress anywhere. I lent it to Mary last time she went down to see Dick and I haven't seen it since. I *must* have it."

"That's a low trick. Where's Mary?"

"Class. Won't be back till five."

Both girls continued to hurl things into the suitcase without any regard to order or neatness, Starr attempting to dress at the same time. She ran frantically around with one stocking off and one on. "Oh, dear! I just remembered; I haven't 'phoned for a taxi. Won't you run down and do it while I finish dressing?"

"Sure. Gimme a nickel."

"Look in my purse."

The search was unsuccessful. Sylvia ran up and down the hall demanding, "Anybody got a nickel?" in a penetrating yell. After a long interval there was an affirmative answer and she came tearing down the back stairs. Starr was almost in tears.

"There's a run in my best and only clean stockings. What'll I do?"

"Wear another pair."

"Haven't got any."

"Bet anything you have." Sylvia went to the bureau drawer and triumphantly fished forth a sound pair. She dodged into the closet again and came out with the missing black satin. "God, but you're a dumb bunny! This was here all the time."

"Oh, thanks a million times. I'm so upset I can't think. And *look* at this room. I can't go off and leave it like this."

By this time she was fully dressed, looking as fresh and smart as if she had spent hours at her toilette. But the room was a sight. All around were clothes, on chairs, on the floor, on the dresser; powder was spilled

all over the dressing table and the bureau drawers yawned wide.

Sylvia said in a resigned tone: "Don't worry. I'll fix it up. What's the good news waiting at the other end of the line?"

"Alec."

"Oh-h-h-h! The old Alexander-uncle, eh?"

"I know." The other's response was to the spirit rather than the letter of the comment. "But I'll just blow up if I don't get away and get away quick."

"Back to-night?"

"Doubt it."

"Got a green card?"

"Of course not, and no chance to get one."

"What's the answer, then?"

"You'll have to report me in."

"All right. But where will you be staying in case of a mix up?"

"Lloyd's, I guess, if I can land him. I wired him at the same time as Alec, but only waited for one answer."

Lloyd Dresser was also an "uncle" but of a more legitimate kind, being Helen Quigg's widowed stepfather, with a duplex apartment in New York where he kept open house for such friends of Helen's as wanted to put up there. He was known as being both a good sport and safely trustworthy. Indeed it was common rumor that one or two of the Balch Hall crowd, a cult with enterprising views regarding middle-aged, unattached men had endeavored to make him, and had been not unkindly laughed at for their advances, whereupon one of them had fallen violently in love with him, to the edification of the Trumbull Housers who made

his life a burden to him about his fatal charms. There were uncles and uncles in the lives of such Sperry girls as made a playground of New York. One of them had given Babe Protheroe an emerald pendant, and Celia Way had returned from a party with another owning a fur coat of which there was no previous record. What the girls had given in return was a matter of conjecture, with little doubt in the public mind as regards Babe.

"Have a wonderful time," was Sylvia's farewell. "And keep your foot on the brake." For Alexander Stark, a Wall Street man of forty, rich, generous, and easy-living, was deemed to be rather dangerously and therefore attractively experimental.

The telephone rang. Taxi for Miss Mowbray. "Right-o!" Starr was off in a whirl.

No word came from her that night. So it was a week-end party. Sylvia loyally reported her in for the night, looked up her Saturday classes, found that she had two, and so announced her as suffering from a slight cold. Saturday evening Starr called her chum on long distance.

"Everything all right at your end?"

"Yes. I've fixed it for you. Having a good time?"

Starr laughed queerly. "Grand!"

"Staying at Lloyd's?"

"Yes. Just now I'm on a party."

"How's Unky Alec?"

"I canned him—at the station."

"No! What for?"

"Oh, we had a little difference of opinion. About lodgings. I'll be back some time to-morrow."

Having a headache Sunday evening Sylvia turned in

early. She woke from an uneasy sleep thinking that she had heard some one in the outer room. She called. No answer. After a time she rose quietly, opened the door and looked out into the room.

Starr in her dressing gown was lolling in the only easy chair. She had turned the principal wall ornament of Suite Twenty around so that the official motto faced outward, and was looking at it with an expression relaxed, weary, inscrutable.

"Hello, girl."

"'Lo, yourself."

"Have a swell time?"

"I'll tell you when I've had more chance to think it over."

Sylvia stared. "Don't you *know* whether you had a good time or not? That's a piffing state of mind, I'll say, for a genuine H. B. V."

Starr transferred her attention for a swift moment to her friend. "Well, I'm still hard boiled," she said.

Again her look was fixed on the jumbled symbolism of the motto. And now there had come into it a quality which gave the other girl a little shudder, not unpleasurable, in spite of its tingle of alarm.

CHAPTER X

CLAD in skating togs, Sara La Lond climbed the stairs of Trumbull, her hockey stick trailing and bumping after her, and dragged herself listlessly along the hall, limping on her right leg. From time to time she thrust a bluish finger into her mouth. She was sniveling. Sylvia, emerging from Twenty, asked with concern:

"What's the matter with you?"

"The Freshmen beat us."

"Don't you care. You'll make Varsity all right." Varsity is a selection on paper of the best players from the four class teams, having no more actual existence than an All-American football eleven.

"Damn Varsity! I wanted to beat 'em. We dubbed around like a lot of sissies."

"Well, it's nothing to blubber over."

"I know it. I guess I'm shot." Sara was by nature a Spartan.

"Come over and have some chocolate."

"Got to study."

"You'll crack if you don't look out."

To this admonition the scholar responded only with a careless shake of the head. Sylvia thought of what Patterson Gifford had said of her. Could he be right? How did he know so much about her?

In the morning Sylvia woke up rather "shot" herself.

The familiar room was hateful to her, the prospect of classes, nauseous. Every stroke of the chapel bell jangled on her raw nerves. The thought of fourteen or fifteen hours in the coming day spent among the fussiness, the pettiness, the chattiness (oh, God! the chattiness!) of several hundred of her kind and sex inspired in her an impulse to YELL. Sylvia was having her turn at an ailment rife in the middle of term, of which the cause is monotony and the chief symptom desperation. She announced to her chum in local and inelegant style:

“Girl; I’ve got the itch.”

Starr was interested. “What are you going to do about it?”

“Something or bust.” She looked out of the window where the sun was pouring a candescence that rippled and shattered into a million facets of cold flames from the crisp snow. “I’d go hitch-hiking if I could get some one to go with me.”

“Not me,” disclaimed the other. “I’ve got a written in Art to do for Old Switches.” This display of virtue, as Sylvia well understood, was due mainly to the truancy of the previous week-end. Starr’s spirit, if not content, was temporarily sated as regards adventure. “Take Verity.”

“Too young and inexperienced for rough diplomacy.”

“Let’s see, then. Roxy Ann is rehearsing. Gwen’s on the R. L. (meaning the Registrar’s list; for some dereliction, involving confinement within the town limits). Helen Quigg?—No; I guess Helen isn’t doing any pedestrian stunts. Maybe you could get——”

“I’m going to ask Sara La Lond.”

"Try and get her! She won't quit work long enough."

"Betcha the lunches I do."

To Starr's astonishment, on returning at ten o'clock she beheld the La Lond girl, a faint pink of excitement in her usually sallow cheeks and her dark, big eyes crinkling with excitement, in full regalia, seated on the couch while Sylvia dressed hastily.

"Where are you headed for?"

"How do we know?"

"When'll you be back?"

"At the end of a perfect day,—mebbe."

Total uncertainty is the informing spirit of a proper hitch-hike, a form of outlawry which consists in delivering oneself over to the chance of gratuitous wheeled travel. The qualities demanded are initiative, tact, nerve, attractiveness enough to enlist the coöperation of the motoring public and self-reliance enough to prevent adventure from degenerating into license. The costume, carefully systematized by previous experimenters with a view to the best results, is practically the same as for a trip to the Big City; in fact, that is the impression to be produced upon the unsuspecting accomplices. Baggage is barred; money is often foregone, and the thoroughly conscientious hitch-hiker does not even pack a cracker against hunger, though cigarettes may be taken ad lib. Both girls wore well-fitting suits, good shoes (this is important as making a favorable impression of respectability, as well as for utilitarian reasons) and small, smartish hats. Sylvia had borrowed Starr's opossum jacket for herself (in the owner's absence) and had loaned Sara her own Hudson

seal. They gave the impression of two demure and properly conducted young women bent on some definite errand—which was about as far from the facts as appearances can divagate.

They set out northward for the main road. Distinctly an attractive pair; Sylvia with her defiant, mobile young face and her boyish gait and figure with its impudent hint of rounded womanhood beneath the close jacket; Sara with her athletic vigor and grace and her questing, avid eyes. For half an hour they tramped briskly, looking neither to the right nor to the left. Then Sylvia, who had learned her technic from the most experienced hitch-hikers of her time, began to lag a bit, casting exploratory glances over her shoulder. Almost at once her artifice was rewarded. With a shriekage of brakes a small, closed car pulled up, and, at the end of a pronounced skid a puffy and self-satisfied male head protruded with the query as to whether they wouldn't like a lift. They would.

As it is a convention of the game to be a good mixer and pay your way with fellowship, Sylvia sat in front with him and made talk. Guessing that he would be impressed, she told him the truth about herself and her companion. He was impressed, and to impress her in turn exhibited the extra fittings of his car, including a nude lady motometer deemed very classy, a special cut-out, and a fancy cigar lighter. His business, he proudly explained, was selling accessories. The girls sat in the car and smoked while he solicited business in country town garages and village groceries, and when he regretfully dropped them with a date for a later meeting (which they had not the

slightest intention of keeping) they were twenty-five miles on their undetermined way. Sara bethought her of a nice tea-room at Bergentown, somewhere in the vicinity—at least it ought to be. They decided upon that as an objective, subject to change.

Their next pick-up was a Socony monster whose driver won their good opinion by giving always more than half the roadway to lighter and speedier vehicles instead of presuming upon his bulk to hog the middle. This was good for six miles, to which a loquacious plumber in a limousine with richly oiled upholstery added three more. Following this they had their first misadventure. They were fairly in the car before Sylvia perceived that they had to deal with two specimens of a most difficult and troublesome genus, the youthful small-town sport. By adroit management she succeeded in quelling the immediate advances of the driver beside whom she sat, without getting him so sore that it would be necessary to get out and walk. A hitch-hiker who can do this is no longer in the novice class. All might have gone well had not Sara committed a cardinal error of inexperience by producing a cigarette, symbol of feminine depravity to the bucolic mind.

"I guess these kids know their onions," cackled the rear-seat Don Juan, slipping his arm about the girl.

"What-say we take 'em to Sid's place for a few drinks and a hotsy-totsy old time?" proffered the driver. "What about it, girlies?"

Their objections and protests were overborne with boisterous laughter and playful mauulings. Sylvia, cool-headed and resolute, saw that this case called for action.

"Where's Sid's?" she asked.

"Atta girl!" exulted her companion, gratified by this apparent acceptance of the situation. "Atta sport! Just up across Brundage's Hill Road a coupla miles."

She moved nearer to him. He grabbed her, gleefully asserting that he could drive the old boat with one hand as well as two. Sylvia, still in his embrace, waited until he had slowed down for the turn. Then she kicked his foot from the accelerator, jammed her own down on the brake, and with a snatch at the wheel swung the car off the roadway into a snow bank. While the frenzied driver was still struggling with the car and his discomfiture, she rolled out, followed by Sara. Another car was speeding down the road toward them. Seeing that something was wrong, it slowed, and, as the girl ran into the road with hand uplifted, stopped. It was a shining and costly glory of a car. The lone occupant, a furry, dressy, granite-faced, old-appearing young man, removed a cigar from his lips and silently looked his inquiry.

"These boys insulted us," explained Sylvia.

The stranger took it under consideration, seemed to decide that it was nothing to get excited over, and spoke. "Did they? Get in."

The non-driver of the half-ditched auto came running up, followed by his companion. "Hey, you!" he blustered. "You can't get away with anything here, you goddam dood."

The fur-bearing motorist gave this due consideration also. He reached into a side pocket and drew forth an automatic. "Can't I?" said he. "Get out."

The girls got in. The boys withdrew, abashed but jeering to show they were not afraid.

"We were going to Bergentown," stated Sylvia.

"Were you?" said the rescuer. "I wasn't."

"Don't let us incommode you," said Sylvia politely.

"I won't," he replied.

He turned about, drove them seven miles at an appalling speed, and pulled up in front of a bleak town hall. "Anything else?"

"No. Thank you a thousand times. We enjoyed the ride very much."

"Did you? I didn't," returned the furred one and vanished around a turn.

"That's the way life is," murmured Sylvia. "You run into something grand and exciting and it passes along and leaves you flat. We shall never see his like again."

Himself they never saw again. But they read of him a fortnight later, under the newspaper caption

CLUB BOOTLEGGERS KILLED.

The description of the man and the car was unmistakable.

The Bergentown tea-room, it appeared, was closed for repairs.

"That's that," said Sylvia. "What next?"

"Who cares?" Sara was now well inspired by the spirit of the venture. "Onward Christian Hikers. Strike for the open road."

Thenceforth their pilgrimage, as itemized in Sylvia's note-book, later written up, proceeded as follows:

Item: farmer in shiny new Ford . . . 4 miles.

Item; drunken, swinish insurance salesman . . .
2 miles and quit in disgust. A *foul* creature.

Item; country doctor and wife . . . 7 miles,
being three miles out of their way. A pair of fussy
old darlings, much concerned for the safety of
us two young innocents.

Item: delivery wagon . . . $\frac{1}{2}$ mile (puncture).

Item; bass horn of a country band, in great
hurry to make a church fair somewhere but helped
us along . . . 2 miles.

Item; taxi on country call, very talkative . . .
1 mile.

Item; girl in touring car (a very rare type of
pick-up on a hike; girl's inhumanity to girl makes
countless thousands mourn) . . . 4 miles on our
way and 1 mile out of it before we found our
mistake.

Item; fatherly, middle-aged bank cashier who
became quite paternal and told us all about his
daughter who was a head librarian, though
only 35, whereat we expressed voluble admiration,
Sara making a special hit with him and getting
us both invited home to lunch, which we didn't
accept . . . 12 miles.

Total of distance covered since departure . . .
65 miles (estimated) and high time we had some
grub and considered the homeward way.

They bought crackers, cheese and ginger ale at a
grocery and ate it sitting on a rail fence. Before they
had finished a hospitable looking milk truck—trucks

are generally easy—came along, rattledy-banging with empties and pulled up at Sylvia's food-muffled but still comprehensible signal. A gargoylish head protruded and estimated them from a level eye (one), the other being slanted at an involuntary but coquettish angle.

"Hop yourselves in," invited the proprietor of this singular countenance.

On the whole they would have preferred not to. The quarters would be close and the proximity possibly unsavory. But the unwritten law of the sport provides that a "call" is a commitment. In they got. The driver was young, robust and chatty. They gave themselves out as stenographers returning from a disabled car and desirous of getting to the next town, this being as far as they expected to be able to endure the association. To their self-identification his prompt response was a foxy leer and a "Know any newer ones than that?" The situation called for a display of saving dignity. Sylvia said coldly:

"I don't know what you mean."

He was dismayingly undismayed. "Sure, you do!" And he began to sing in a stentorian voice and wholly off the key, a ditty strange to them:

*"You can fool any other silly owl in the tree
But you CAN'T—FOOL—ME!"*

His next procedure was to reach over and give Sylvia a hearty thump on the shoulder. "I'm wise. College skirts. Which institootion, ladies?"

"I think you're drunk," returned the "stenographer" with a fine show of indignation. "Let us out."

He turned to grin in her face, his slanted, squinty eye giving to the manifestation an expression of satyr-like lechery formidable to behold, and immediately belied by the reassuring chuckle in his voice. "Sit tight, sister. No offense meant. Don't get sore."

"No girl likes to be called a liar," put in Sara.

"All right; all *right!* You could be Colleen Moore and Patsy Ruth Miller for all I care. You see, I got a sister in Vassar and I know something about these college cutie-cut-ups."

"You?" The exclamation was unanimous, which made it none the more flattering. He took it in good part.

"Don't look it, do I? It's straight, though. A chunk out of the middle of the old pay check goes to Pow-kipsy every week. And if ever I caught my kid traipsin' around pickin' up rides, I'd just turn her over and spank her. Oh, it's all right for youse two," he added generously. "You can get away with it. But not my li'l sis. *She's* too darn pretty. . . . Wotcha laffin at?"

"I guess that makes us even," declared Sylvia. "We're your passengers as far as you'll take us. Have a cigarette."

Nearly eighteen miles this proved to be before he reluctantly informed them that he had to turn off or depend on them to think up a better lie for the boss than he had in stock. They left him with urgent invitations to come down to Sperry for one of the hockey or basketball games, really heartfelt and hopeful, for they were socially strong enough to put anything over, and could imagine nothing more enlivening than pre-

senting so genuine a specimen as Mr. Stanley Bogash (such was his amazing name) to the crowd. But he modestly declined.

"The Toot Ensemble Social Club is about my high speed. Hope I meet you again, girls." And he was off.

Luck went with him, forsaking the travelers. Their next pick-up was a soapy and corrupt auctioneer's assistant who followed them with a volley of abuse and smut when they insisted on getting out. Three successive lifts at widening intervals thereafter netted them less than two miles, all told. Everything seemed to be full or going in the wrong direction or turning off at the next crossroad or callous to their appealing glances and drooping figures. Moreover, the sky was getting filmy and it was past the middle of the afternoon.

"Heaven helps those that help themselves," observed Sara philosophically. "Let's hit the pike and keep going."

"For forty miles, I suppose!"

"We can make a start, anyway."

Sara was a changed person. The spirit of the adventure had taken hold on her. She was vivid and alert as a fox. Her unwearying stride—faltering only when a prospect hove in sight and that purely for purposes of deception—threatened to wear down the endurance of even Sylvia's strong young body.

"You certainly have got rid of your blue devils," remarked the latter.

"Red," said Sara abruptly. This was nearer to a confidence than the taciturn student had ever come before.

"Mine are blue, when I have 'em."

"They're not so bad. I wish to God I had your temperament!"

"I don't believe I've got any," confessed Sylvia.

"That's what I mean," returned the other, gloomily envious.

Sylvia made a venture. "Is it so hard?"

"It's hell, sometimes. I wouldn't care so much if it didn't"—she hesitated—"intrude when I'm working."

Said Sylvia boldly: "Well, then, why don't you?"

"I'm afraid. Oh, not physically. It's a kind of superstition. I have a feeling that if I didn't—if I don't go straight, it would react on my work, and that I couldn't go on here. Maybe I can't anyway. I may have to drop out at the end of the year."

"What?"

"If I don't make the Alumnæ Scholarship."

"Is it money?"

Sara nodded. "The man who was helping me through died. Oh, it was all right, my taking it. Not but what I'd probably have done it if it hadn't been. I'd do anything, *anything* to get my education," she concluded fiercely.

"You've got a cinch on the Alumnæ, from what I hear."

"I ought to come through if I don't crash first."

"Nerves?" enquired the other sympathetically.

"You can call it that if you like. It is nerves, of a kind; a highly specialized kind as they would say in Hygiene if Hygiene dared to face a case like mine. Wouldn't they be horrified!" Her laugh was hard and mirthless.

"Maybe you ought to see a doctor," was Sylvia's suggestion.

"Last vacation I went to a neurologist; one of the best. What do you think he gave me for my ten dollar fee? The best he could do for me was to tell me smugly that after marriage my symptoms would doubtless abate. 'What if I don't marry?' I said and he spread out his hands like a crow's wings and purred out: 'Well, my dear young lady! it would be advisable,' and handed me some in-the-meantime tosh about cold baths and exercise and mental control. Witchcraft to cast out red devils. Hartnett, I'm not *bad*!" she cried, her face a tragic bewilderment. "Why are some girls made that way?"

Secretly appalled, Sylvia with a feeble idea of presenting the bright side ventured: "Wouldn't you rather be that way than the other way—without anything of that at all—like Myrtle Dashiell?"

"No! I'd give anything to be as unfeeling as stone. Oh, well; I'll live through it, I expect. Anyway I've got it off my chest. . . . Let's talk about *your* troubles."

They plodded along through the dwindling day six weary miles before Sylvia flumped down on a log. "I'm not going to walk another dam' step," she announced sulkily. "What's more you've got to engineer the next hitch—if any. I'm pepleless."

Cars became scarcer and scarcer. In half an hour the watcher hailed but seven, all of them vain hopes. By this time they would have gladly caught a ride on a garbage cart, had one offered. The vehicle that next

hove in sight was not much more ornamental, being a queer wheeled hybrid operated by a lone male, the most promising species of prospect. But to Sara's seductive "Hi!" the man turned a face as blank as a desert landscape as his car humped unevenly along, and, like a desert landscape, fringed with an oasis in the form of a stubbly mustache.

"Get a 'Road Closed' sign. That's the only way *you'll* stop 'em," said Sylvia, very cross.

But Sara was looking hopefully toward the turn around which the unsympathetic car had vanished.

"I think he's coming back."

The auto chugged into view, backing jerkily. Sara stood waiting, her lithe body straight as a flame in still air, a touch of flame in her cheeks. "Did somebody signal me?" asked the motorist.

"Yes. We did."

"I'm sorry. I'm rather absent-minded when I drive. What is it?"

"We wanted a ride."

"Where to?"

"The way you're going."

"Get in." He was perfectly cheerful, perfectly obliging, perfectly neutral. Sylvia tumbled into the rear seat, leaving the front to the new leader. She wanted to go to sleep and promptly did so.

Observation of the Sylvian technic had taught Sara that in successful hitch-hiking the whole duty of the hitcher toward the hitchee is to be conversationally interesting and interested. What should she tackle this curious, composed and not unattractive specimen

on? Having noted that the car carried a commercial license she asked (as man to man, so to speak):

"What's your line?"

"Eh?" returned the stranger, turning on her a pair of small and shrewd eyes in which a faint astonishment shone.

"I asked what line of business you're in," repeated the girl wondering whether she had committed a solecism of some sort.

"Oh! I beg your pardon. What would you think, now?"

This was her cue to become flippant. "Butter and eggs."

"And a pound of cheese," he capped the line mildly.

Sara's brilliant eyes went wide. "What? Wh-wh-where did you get that?"

"Off the same fly-leaf as you got yours. My Calverley's a first edition."

"I—I thought you were some kind of farmer or grocer or something."

"Well, there are lots of kinds of farmers, and some of 'em even read poetry. I'm a farmer on my few leisure days. This is one of 'em."

The car chugged and jerked and made progress of a sort. In the rear seat Sylvia's troubled slumbers were penetrated by weird chantings and bursts of mirth. She struggled awake enough to speak. "What's all the fuss about?"

Sara turned upon her a strange face, bold with color and fervent with fun. "This is a soul-mate. He knows Calverley by heart and sings the most absurd songs in

a still more absurd voice, and we're going to his house to cook ourselves some dinner——"

"I'm the rottenest cook in the world, and you're no better," objected Sylvia.

"I'm the best—almost," stated the cheery and confident stranger. "Also there is beer. Home brew."

Said Sylvia severely to her mate: "Did you ever hear of an institution called Sperry College?"

"Oh, that's all fixed. He'll drive us home afterward. It's only thirty miles. He's awfully nice and his name is—did you tell me your name?"

"No. We've been too busy. I am known by the romantic and overpowering name of Marmaduke Rainger; Mark, for short. The Château Rainger is at your service, gentles and nobles, if ever we reach it in this ark which is constructed exclusively out of spare parts left over from Noah's craft of the same name."

"Is there a Mrs. Rainger or anything?" Sylvia wanted to know.

"Nothing worth mention. It's a terrible risk you're taking. But you are two to my one," he pointed out gravely, "and you have the advantage of me in youth and daring."

"Don't be an ass, Hartnett," added Sara.

"Oh, I only asked as a matter of form. I'm game for anything if I can get fed."

With a gasp, a snort and a gurgle the car perished on a side road two hundred yards short of a snug-built white cottage. Laden with bundles they made the rest of the trip on foot.

Rainger built fires, fetched water, set the table, put on potatoes, onions and corn, got out the promised beer

and broiled a steak over hickory embers in an open fireplace, that justified fully his generous estimate of his culinary skill.

"But what *is* he?" whispered Sylvia, as the two girls retired to the one ground-floor bedroom to wash up.

"I don't know. Something to do with shipping in the city, I believe. This is his playhouse. I think he's *grand*."

"Very likely. But how is he going to get us back?"

"Leave it to him."

Accepting all responsibility, the host went to a neighboring house to telephone, after dinner, but returned with a dubious face and bad news. "Can't get a mechanic up here till to-morrow, and the garage won't promise a car before midnight and aren't sure then!"

The truants looked at each other. "What'll we *do*?"

"Stay here," invited the proprietor of the "Château Rainger."

"I've got a philos' class first thing in the morning," said Sara, who majored in that subject.

"All right. Breakfast at five, served by my own fair hands. I'll undertake to land you on the campus—again my own fair hands—before sunrise. Is it a deal?"

"It's a deal."

By an irrefragable rule of Suite Twenty, if any one of the H. B. V.'s failed to return on time from an absence, one of the others dropped in at eight o'clock at the local hotel and waited for a possible phone call, thus eliminating the danger of being listened in on by the constituted authorities. This time it was Verity

who got Sylvia's message and undertook to fix things up for the absentees. Reassured, Sylvia turned in. Sara proclaimed herself never less tired in her life. She was going to sit up for a while and help the master of the house keep the fire awake and fed. Before she dropped asleep, Sylvia heard quick talk and low laughter outside. A saying of that wiseacre, Starr, came back to her: "If they can make me laugh, they can make me love 'em." Starr was facile in her affections. But Sara; she couldn't quite conceive of Sara in love. Yet it had been such a different Sara that day, a Sara to whom anything might be possible. . . . She woke up with that Sara, fully dressed, standing over her.

"Oh, Lordy!" groaned the sleeper. Then, "Haven't you been to bed at all?"

"Not that I can recall. But we had some swell coffee at half past two. Breakfast will be served in the dining car in ten minutes."

The first graying of the east had hardly begun when Rainger set them down at the campus edge. Both girls kissed him good-by. They could hardly do less. Besides, they wanted to! As they crossed to Trumbull House Sylvia noticed a light in the office building.

"Whose room is that?"

"Looks like Giff's."

"I thought so. Let's walk around that way."

"And run the risk of being seen and reported?"

Sylvia's smile was secret and confident. "He wouldn't ever report us."

"I'll wait for you."

Sylvia made a cautious approach to a spot that commanded a view into the room. Patterson Gifford was

bent over a desk with papers on it. As if sensing something alien to his work he lifted and turned his face. It was tired and lined and thoughtful. The girl was struck anew, was stricken by his austere beauty. She blew a kiss toward the unconscious figure and rejoined her comrade.

There was no difficulty over their entry. Starr, for whom servants and minor officials gladly perjured their souls and risked their jobs, had corrupted the complaisant old watchman with food and drink. Sara yawned.

"Too late for a nap. Got any coffee?"

"Yes."

"Let's brew a pot. Then I'll go to work and you can turn in."

They made the coffee in Twenty. Sara drank two cups and set to her books. But Sylvia did not turn in. Her day of adventure was not yet ended.

The coffee had given her an idea for a finish.

CHAPTER XI

FROM the patent bottle with attendant cup and saucer, Patterson Gifford lifted his tired eyes to the dim-bright face of the girl, bright with adventure, dim with a soft weariness. She stood mutely, wistfully smiling, in the oblong of yellow light from his opened door.

"Was it you outside, about fifteen minutes ago?"

"Yes."

He nodded. "I thought so."

"How did you know? It was pitch dark."

To this he made no answer. "What are you doing here?" he asked presently.

"I thought you might like some coffee."

"All right." He took the utensils from her hand and stood looking at her expectantly. The expectancy seemed to be of her departure.

"You might be a little human," she said sorrowfully.

"I might be too human."

"I don't know the answer to that one."

"Perhaps this is it." He stood back for her to enter. She dropped into the nearest chair. "Another night ride?" he asked in a voice whose unpleasant effect was mitigated by the cracker he was munching.

"Not of the same kind. Did you ever hear anything more of those people?"

"Nothing."

"Then the human baboon didn't die."

"I'm afraid not," he said with such gloom that she chuckled.

"You wanted to slaughter them all, didn't you? I hated you for it at the time. Because I was so scared, I suppose. Do you know, you're very easy to hate?" (Had she put it "You're very easy to love," the voice would have been no more caressing). His face did not relax its strained, reflected brutality.

"Do you know why I wanted to smash their foul heads in?"

"Yes. No. Tell me."

"You remember, I told you that you've always given me an impression of physical reticence."

She said softly: "Yes. I liked that. I think I am that way."

"It was the thought of that reticence being overborne, conquered, invaded that drove me berserk."

The fierce old Norse word fitted and expressed his strength, as tempered as steel and as austere. Like a fanned and secret spark, the dark passion in her leapt to meet and fuse with his savagery. "*I wanted* you to kill them—for a minute."

"You called me a brute. It was true enough. Every man that is a man can be a brute under provocation."

"Is that a warning?"

He stared across the table at her, half admiring, half amused at her effrontery. Beneath that trim, serene, confident and unaroused poise, the presumptuous, the preposterous femininity of her called to him

with a summons which he understood so much better than she.

"It is as you take it."

As if pursuing some earlier trend of thought she observed: "My mother says that what's wrong with the world is women starting in to think for themselves forty years ago, and their daughters starting in now to do what the mothers only thought about."

"I don't know how your mother got into this; but what is she like?"

"Oh, peaceful and set and old. Tries hard to be open-minded about me."

"What would she think of this?"

"Nothing. It's in her scheme of things that women should get up early to feed men."

"Of what this involves, then. Of what it is leading to."

Calmly she accepted that implication. "She'd think it was *terrible*."

"Is it terrible?"

"I don't know." (Meaning, of course, "I don't care.")

Did she know? Or did she only feel vaguely to what consummation of tyrannous nature they were being impelled? What was the basis of that superb calm; that unafraid acceptance? Innocence; inexperience? He needed an answer to that question. But now she had a question of her own.

"Have you been working all night?"

"Pretty much."

"Are you a bad sleeper?"

"At times." He could have told her that he had

lain awake that night, thinking of her until fancy became an intolerable flame.

"Then do you come here and work?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes in the tower room of our house, where there is a stove."

"I thought so."

He looked his question.

"I can see the light from the corner room of Twenty. I had a feeling that it was yours."

His hard smile changed without mollifying his expression. "I've flunked more than one of your little companions by that light."

"Whom are you flunking now?"

"Was Gwendolen Peters on that road house spree of yours?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm perhaps flunking her."

"How beastly of you!" she flashed. "I wouldn't have thought you'd use private information that way."

Imperturbable, he answered: "I would and I shall." After a moment he added: "You may as well understand that I don't recognize the hairsplitting and infantile ethics that reduce life to the status of a playground for mechanicalized sports. If I had conducted that little affair in the woodlot according to the principles of the Marquis of Queensberry, you might not be so well off as you are now."

A thought leapt in Sylvia's mind. What if she were to say to him, "Were you saving me for yourself?" Just for the adventure, the risk of it! What would be his come-back to that?

He stated disagreeably, "I make my own rules."
(She abandoned the gaudy idea.)

"Why be grouchy about it?" she retorted. "Besides you can't. The world is run by rule."

"Not as much as it used to be. Most of the old rules were bonds, forged to keep the human spirit in subjection. The acid of thought has eaten them through."

"Don't you believe in anything?"

"Yes. Work. Scholarship. Achievement."

"Freedom?" she ventured.

"For myself. The others can go to hell."

Beneath their feet the furnace man banged about like a stoker for the noisy fires of a discredited future. Gifford looked out of the window at a paling star. Sylvia rose. She stretched out her hand for the vacuum bottle.

"You haven't half drunk the coffee I made you."

"So I haven't."

Both laughed at nothing. Something dissolved in that nervous outbreak; his restraint, her reticence.

"Sylvia," he croaked.

The Eve-instinct, deep and obscure and flamingly apt to his call, rose and for the first time in her unawakened womanlife, utterly possessed her as she felt his lips stir and quiver upon hers. She leaned back from him, her eyes dilate, big with secret speculation, hot with undefined expectancy. Once more and longer they kissed. She freed herself composedly enough, but wavered a little as she stepped back.

"Good-by, Giff."

"This isn't the end, you know."

"How could it be?"

She darted across the snow, a night-elf pursued by the couriers of the dawn. As she ran, a queerly exultant thought tingled from brain to nerve-ends. "Starr can't tell me anything about thrills after *that!*"

CHAPTER XII

"WHY the feverish energy, M'Hartnett?"

Sylvia, surrounded by notes, reference books, and reports, looked up at her classmate with nervous eyes. "Got a written to turn in."

"Who for?"

"Giff."

"You should disturb yourself! He'll hand you an A on any old canned goods."

"Think so?" Sylvia was flattered. "But I gotta furnish something. It was due last week."

"They've got the Spring clothes show down at the Inn. Let's beat the bunch to it."

"What about this tripe?"

"Leave it till evening. Wet towel; hot coffee. You'll have it all finished ere yet the tocsin sounds."

Ever willing to be seduced from work, Sylvia yielded. After inspection of the new styles the pair went for toasted sandwiches and coffee and, with a bottle of the stimulant in hand for the night-watch, strolled reluctantly home. There Sylvia decided that she was not quite keyed up to work; maybe a bath would help. After the bath she recalled an important letter unanswered and after the letter the deprecant announcement, "It's only me," admitted Ida McKay on borrowing bent. Even Ida was welcome as an excuse for

postponing the evil hour and, to her surprise and gratification, was bidden in for a talk. Ida's snappiest news was that Nixie, two pillows and a pair of blankets were out for the evening with a suitor. As tidings, this was neither surprising nor new, but it served to while away the time until nearly midnight, when Ida departed. Then, with the coffee at her elbow and Starr spreading a film of cheese over a pile of crackers, the sufferer settled down to the ordeal.

One o'clock sounds on the deep bell; then two. Sylvia lifts a weary head. *Why* did she postpone the damn stunt so long? She began to pity herself. Alone and wakeful in a world of night. Any one else awake at that hour—except of course, Nixie? Probably not? Not even Sara La Lond, who had abandoned her nocturnal pacings since the famous hitch-hike. Sara had seemed a different person since that day. Could it have been Mark Rainger's influence? Had she seen him since? A curious personality; not charming, exactly, but in some way pervasive. Hard to forget. And Sara; how vivid she had looked that day! A small, brown face with big brown eyes that drowsed and dreamed and became abruptly, vividly awake, alive, questing, when some speech of Rainger's struck fire and mirth from them. And the low laughter of the two in the fire-flecked dimness of that outer room at the "Château Rainger." Could anything have happened? . . . Of course not! Absurd to think of! And yet—with a groan she dragooned her mind back to the task, drove her numbed pencil across the paper.

Something stirring in the hall below. The slave

of duty shook her head violently, trying to free it from these disastrous influences, when—Clang! Brang! Bong! Bong-Bong-Bong-Bong-Bong-Bong!

Fire drill!

Bump! went Verity's window; bump! two seconds later, Starr's. The two emerged in bathrobes and carrying a towel each, to be joined by the cursing Sylvia.

"Twice in less than a month. It's a damn shame!"

"I smell smoke, though," asserted Verity.

"Freshmen *always* smell smoke," said Sylvia crossly.

She darted in, snatched a towel, and rejoined the others. In the hallway they met Sara La Lond, emerging in a breeze.

"Shut your window, you dumb bunny!" shouted Sylvia to her. She vanished.

The hallways and stairs were alive with hurrying figures.

"What time is it?" asked Starr, with a sudden thought.

"Just after two. Why?"

"Nixie!"

"Great cats! That's so!"

Practically a state of feud existed between Suite Twenty and Elsie Nichols since the event of the lamentable Loyster; but that counted for nothing in such an extremity as this. Against the constituted authorities, all Sperry girls (except Self-Guv officials and a few volunteer godhoppers) stood shoulder to shoulder. Out in the hallway, full of softly outlined forms and the sound of shuffling feet, the H. B. V.'s sent the query circulating in whispers.

"Any one know whether Nixie is in?"

Nobody did. Dollars to dill pickles she was in the rear seat of somebody's car, it being a rainy night. Well; there was still a chance of covering her trail at roll call.

Down the close huddled lines of girls, the sleepy responses ran. "Martin?" "Here!" Massinger!" "Here!" "Neylan?" "Here!" "Nichols!" "Here!" A pause. The warden's voice repeated "Nichols." The lines swayed uneasily. "She's on," went the gloomy whisper. "Who answered for Nichols?" "I thought you said 'Pickthall,'" whimpered the owner of that name. It had been a forlorn hope, but worth trying.

"Miss Reynolds: report from Elsie Nichols' room."

There was a dismal silence, through which sounded the swift patter of Esther Reynolds' steps, going, returning.

"I can't find her."

A long, rippling sigh down the lines. Pinched at last. Well, they all knew it was bound to come.

"Drill dismissed."

The bath-robed figures returned to their rooms to conjecture what penalty would be meted out to the truant, and to sleep, all but the unhappy procrastinator of reports.

At four-twenty the pallid remains of Sylvia Hartnett set the alarm for seven and staggered to bed. The remainder could be finished in the morning.

The jangling whir awoke Starr, too. "Didn't you finish?" she asked drowsily.

"No," barked the toil-worn student. "Get up and go over it for mistakes, won't you?"

"Awri'. Caw me, haff 'nour," mumbled the obliging but slumbrous chum.

Verity joined the symposium at 7:30, offering to touch up indecipherable words, or even to type it if there was time; meanwhile producing rolls and promising coffee, as breakfast was out of the question for the laggard. Over the finished opus the two delivered consolatory assurances.

"Of course I don't know the subject, but it looks swell to me," from Starr.

"D'you think it's long enough to make a good showing?" came the anxious query.

"It isn't so very long." Verity was painfully conscientious at times. "But some faculties like 'em short."

"It's certainly neat—for a first draft," contributed Starr.

"And you've got a spiffy bibliography."

"But I don't know that I quite get this part. What does it mean, exactly?" Starr held the page up to the light, as if the explanation might be concealed.

The authoress read it over feverishly. "Why, can't you see? Here! Don't be *dumb*. It means that—it doesn't mean a dam' thing!" she broke out. "That's where the fire drill crashed in on me."

Starr had a helpful idea. "Take Giff's lecture and recast a couple of paragraphs from it. You can cut Chapel and class and catch him when he comes out, with a hand-made excuse."

It seemed the only resource.

Emerging from his recitation room after a class at which Miss Hartnett had not been present, Prof.

Patterson Gifford was waylaid by a wistful and weary maiden who offered a sheaf of neatly clipped sheets with a soft-voiced apology for having overslept. The "faculty" looked unimpressed.

"This was due last Friday, I believe."

"Yes; but I couldn't find some of the authorities that I specially wanted," lied Sylvia glibly. (If only she could catch his eyes with hers which were ready to implore—"Please don't be so facultyish with *me*, Giff!")

"Humph!" commented Prof. Patterson Gifford but Sylvia was so sure of having seen the despotic chin twitch that she reported later to Suite Twenty: "I put it over him like a tent."

The two juniors had a smoke to celebrate the supposed victory, going to the roof for the purpose while Verity studied some new business for her part. Starr, curious, ventured a tentative violation of one of the H. B. V. fundamental tenets; viz., no questions asked.

"Syl, have you really got sneakers for Giff?"

"I expect you might call it that."

"Nobody's ever succeeded in making him yet."

"So they claim. What does that prove?"

"Well—of course—but— isn't it dangerous?"

"That's what gives it a kick. That and his hard shell."

"Are you really crazy about him?"

"I dunno. I might be."

"Lay off him, girl! Lay off him. It's no good."

"I shan't! Why should I? All the rest of you go necking around with boys that would never raise my temperature a millionth of a degree. But if I play a game that's got some pep in it——"

"All right. All *right!* It's your game. I'm out."

"Not sore, are you?"

"Don't be an ass."

"Well, I've had my shot at you. Want to take one at me?"

"Yes: If you want to tell me."

"Shoot. It's about my week-end in New York, isn't it?"

"Yes. You canned Aleck for wanting too much for his money. Then what?"

"Oh, then I called up Lloyd. He was just going out of town, but he left the keys to the apartment with the janitress and a *sweet* note, telling me to make myself at home and the key to the pre-war locker was inside the clock and if I needed pajamas, his best would be honored to be of use, but he was locking up his toothbrush until we knew each other better. He's such an old lamb. So I went down there to think things over."

"What did that get you?"

"It got me an evening paper with a head-line in it about a semi-official reception to some German big-bug at the Plaza that evening. And says I to myself, 'My Fritzie-Captain will be there. Such is fate.'"

"Was he?"

"If he hadn't been, this story wouldn't be worth telling."

"How did you reach him?"

"I tried to crash the gate, but Sperry methods were no good against the cold brutality of Prussian militarism. But I did get a note through informing my Fritzie that Miss Sarepta Hassenpfeffer——

"You told us Schallenberger."

"Yes; but I couldn't remember to save my life, in the excitement of the moment. Any name was good enough, when accompanied with what I put with it. Out came my beautiful Fritzie and I got the thrill that comes but once in a semester—at least, that's my average. He seemed rather pleased, himself."

"Did you own up?"

"Approximately. I couldn't stand for being called Fraulein Sarepta, you know."

"Did he take you in to the show?"

"No. He came out. We went dancing. He dances like a wiz and makes love like a—like a flame. At two in the morning we were drinking champagne in one of those Greenwich Village jazz-joints, and I remembered that Lloyd's was only a few blocks away, so I suggested that he stop in and have a farewell drink." Starr extinguished her cigarette with minute and suspicious care. Sylvia waited. Was this the end of the chapter? Couldn't be! She put the logical question.

"Well? Did he?"

"He did. That is, we had the drink—but not the farewell."

"*Starr!* You mean, you asked him to *stay?*"

"I didn't ask him. It wasn't necessary."

There was a long pause. The girls did not look at each other. Then Sylvia said in what was meant to be a matter-of-fact tone: "I don't know why we make so much fuss over what is a perfectly natural thing. . . . Have you seen him since!"

"No."

"Aren't you going to see him again?"

"I—don't—think—so."

"Starr—don't answer this unless you want to—was it—had you—you never had before, had you?"

There followed a perceptible pause. Starr said quietly, "No."

"Let's go back," said Sylvia. Both were silent during the climb down. In the lighted hallway Sylvia tried hard not to steal furtive glances at her friend. Was she different, changed, perhaps in a way aloof and superior because of her maturing experience? Some girls said that the whole point of view changed when you "became a woman." Would the change be apparent only to the subject of it, or would others feel a subtle difference? Questions impossible to put; equally impossible not to wonder about.

For once, Suite Twenty went to bed betimes. Of the two who had exchanged confidences, it was Sylvia who tossed and burned and finally fell into a sleep troubled by uncertain dreams. The town crier passed through them proclaiming some girl's secret and wild doings, Starr's, Verity's, her own—with Giff!—Sara's, Nixie's, her own again, and finally brought her forth from sleep with his jangling.

It was the Chapel bell rousing Sperry to another day of routine.

CHAPTER XIII

"HEARD the dirt?"

"No. Ply your shovel."

"Nixie."

"What about her?"

"Kicked."

"For keeps?"

"Yep."

"Who told you?"

"Roxy Ann. She got it from Gwen and Gwen met Nixie coming out of Prexy's office."

"Sounds straight enough."

"I'll say so."

"Well, I call it rotten."

"It's a stinkin', dam' shame."

"I thought an R. L. was the worst she'd rate."

"It's all she ought to have had."

"Once they get a hate on you, it's flooey for yours."

"Bet there isn't any other college would slate a girl like that."

"And what did Nixie do, after all? Just stayed out a little after hours."

"It's the limit; that's what it is."

"Dirty pups!"

Not a contributor to the dining hall symposium of wrath but knew that Elsie Nichols had more than deserved her expulsion. That she was on honor to obey

the rules formulated by the student body itself for its own guidance, that she had consistently cheated, involving others in the dangers of her duplicity, counted for nothing. The unwritten law of take-a-chance-on-anything-you-can-get-away-with was on her side: she was a martyr and the authorities tyrants. Trumbull House was hot in partisanship. The resentful quick-fire continued:

"They say she gave Prexy an earful."

"What about?"

"Oh, repressions and rules and not giving a girl an even break with her boy-friends: 'How are lives stunted and starved!'—that stuff."

"I heard she'd 'fessed up."

"To what?"

"Everything."

"Don't you believe it. Nixie'd be game to the finish."

"She'll snap out of it some way."

"How can she if it got to Prexy?"

"Always has."

"But she's been on the J. B. records since second term, Freshman."

"Ida McKay saw her packing up."

"Ida would, if the keyhole wasn't plugged."

"Gee! The nights will be dull without Nixie!"

"I will say this much, though; if any——"

"Sh-sh-sh-sh-sh!"

The nervous, weedy figure of Elsie Nichols lounged through the entrance and slouched to its place.

"Anything left to manger?"

Every one feverously and solicitously passed things to her. She looked about, a gleam of humor in the

dangerous eyes. "Fattening the victim for the sacrifice."

"Is it true, Nixie?"

"Sure, it's true," was the composed reply. "Who's going to take in my orphaned dolls?"

A dozen voices offered hospitality. Pink Delavan inquired: "What did Prexy say?"

"Prexy's a lamb. We had a real heart-to-heart."

"Didn't he kick you?"

"Sure he kicked me. Then I gave him the low-down on some things about Sperry that he'd never even dreamed of. It wasn't his fault." (The whole noisy room became quiet: every interest focused on the speaker).

"Whose was it?"

"The godhoppers. They've had it in for me right along."

Esther Reynolds, the Self-Guv corridor representative sitting at the next table squirmed, and reddened, and her eyes took on a filmy glaze. From further down the room Prudence Chase said quietly:

"That's isn't so, Elsie, and you know it."

There was an excited buzz. Prudence as Chairman of the Judgment Board was not popular with the clique—it was not possible that she should be—but they respected her character and courage. Nixie turned her big, queer head toward the challenge.

"I'm a liar, am I?"

"Yes."

"Right you are, generally speaking. Dishonesty is the best policy if you want to enjoy life at Sperry. So that's that." She fell to eating.

"But, Nixie, what are you going to do-oo-oo?"

"I'll live through it, I guess. Pipe down and talk about something else."

Little else was talked about for three days when a sensation of more immediate concern to Suite Twenty succeeded Nixie's débâcle as a topic. Gwen Peters came flying in from Ethics Two and encountered Starr in the hall.

"Where's Syl?"

"Dunno. Wasn't she in class?"

"For a while she was. Then she wasn't, and I saw her loping across the campus like a bat out of hell."

"What happened?"

"Giff handed her the worst bawling-out of the year."

Patterson Gifford's bawling-out—an inexpressive term for his quietly corrosive method of public castigation—were a tradition and a treat, one of the rare features which kept his pupils expectant and his classes popular. They were bitter, humorous, and just, and they often embodied in lively form a thesis upon the relationship of student and Alma Mater which gave his hearers a new point of view.

Starr made a deduction. "That report, huh?"

"I'll say it was that report. He read part of it to the class, *with* running comments."

Starr whistled, a short, reflective, pitying pipe. "What did he say?"

"The juiciest part was where he said that excerpts from his own unworthy works—she must have cribbed that lecture straight, the dumb bunny!—suggested an interesting contrast between plagiarism and research;

then there was something about personal consideration being overestimated——”

“The skunk! Did he give her name?”

“Didn’t need to. Syl sat there looking like a torch-light parade; then like an icicle. In the intermission for questions, she got up and walked out.” The reporter stopped. She looked hesitantly at the other. “Starr.”

“Well?”

“There was one queer thing about it. You know how Giff usually hands out the whipping-post stuff; calm and pleasant, like a man who rather enjoys the job.”

“Yes.”

“This was different. All the time, he was furiously angry—*hot* angry, you know; not just the hanging judge kinda thing—and hurt. Say: he isn’t crazy about Syl, is he?”

“I hope so,” returned Starr viciously.

All that day the roommates did not see their third member. Nor did her classes, nor the eating hall. At five minutes before ten, she came in. Verity was busy with some chocolate. Starr gave quick study to her friend’s face. There was a tightness in it that she had seen once before; a tightness which, in herself, would have dissolved only in a burst of furious tears. Sylvia never cried. For that very reason Starr was secretly afraid of her; even more afraid for her. She gave commonplace greeting.

“Hullo.”

“Hullo.” The tone was not as frozen as the other had feared.

"Hungry?"

"Yes." This was good.

"Vee's got some grub ready."

"Swell!"

Sylvia got off her shoes. They were wet. Starr brought her a dressing gown and a cigarette. She won no thanks except a nod; also a good sign. The prodigal ate several toasted crackers, drank two cups of chocolate, asked for another Lucky. Vee came over to her.

"Want to sleep in my room to-night?" Vee's cubicle was a one-girl room; Syl would be alone, there. The victim of man's inhumanity to woman shook her head.

"Going to turn in pretty soon?" asked Starr.

"No."

"Want to talk?"

"Yes."

"It was the overdue report, of course."

"Yes."

Verity said in her clear and honest voice what Starr would hardly have ventured. "It was pretty punk, you know."

Angrily accusatory, Sylvia turned on them. "You said it was swell. Both of you."

"That was to cheer you up." Starr meant this to have a soothing effect. She received a glare which would have done credit to a tigress.

The freshman contributed nothing of serenity to Sylvia's mind by adding: "If a faculty believes that you're working him for a meal ticket, he naturally gets sore."

"I'm not working him for a meal ticket," was the wrathful disclaimer. (A "meal-ticket," in this sense,

means high marks or other class favors—and perhaps Sylvia *had* presumed a little on her drag with the professor.)

“Still, he might think so,” pointed out Vee, with a show of reason.

A show of reason was the last straw for the martyr. Her wrath broke through her reticence, in a passionate spate of words. “He’s a loathly toad. I hope he rots. He—he kissed me. *Really* kissed me, I mean. That morning. After the hike. And now he makes a goat of me, this way. It’s rotten. It’s beastly. It’s—it’s—” she searched the store house of wrath for forbidden lore—“it’s *sadistic*. That’s what it is. The snag—(glug)—unk!” This peculiar summation was estimated by the startled hearers to be a composite indictment, comprising the elements of “snake” and “skunk” and finding both insufficient.

Verity, scandalized, said: “You petted with a *faculty*?”

“Of course I did. I didn’t mean to tell, but now I don’t give a damn.”

Unexpectedly Starr murmured: “Poor Giff!” She had remembered what Gwen said, and could imagine that austere face, burning but controlledly still under the self-torture. Starr, instinctively wise in her femininity, knew that when a man fell for Sylvia, he would fall hard, whether Patterson Gifford or another. But what about the girl? What had been her response to the new experience? Her response to her roommate’s comment was a haughty: “I suppose you think that’s funny,” followed by a goodnightless departure for bed.

Hours later the wakeful and thoughtful Starr heard

a long-drawn sigh from the other bed, followed by the pluffy swish of a rearranged pillow.

"Syl?"

"What?"

"Are you sane again?"

"Yes."

"I've got something I want to ask you. When Giff kissed you did you get a kick out of it?"

A low, uncertain and surprising chuckle answered her. "Did I! Oh, boy!" Then: "That's what makes it seem so rotten, his turning on me."

But Starr was not primarily interested in the grievance. That, she felt sure, would adjust itself. "It was first alarm for you, wasn't it?"

"Yep. And it'll be the last, as far as he's concerned."

Starr smiled in the darkness. "I knew you'd come to your senses one of these days."

Again that dim chuckle. "I think my senses have come to me. And I don't quite know what to do about it. At least, I didn't at the time."

Starr sat up abruptly. "What did you do about it?"

"Nothing."

"That's all right then."

"Is it! Wait until I get my chance at that rotter."

Privately Starr considered that Giff had probably been right though rough; but as a discussion upon the sore point would hardly have been conducive to sleep, she merely said: "Good night," and turned over.

CHAPTER XIV

WINTER had broken. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it exploded. Its shattered fragments, snowbanks left in the folds of the Hills, patches in tiny bays of the pond, were being dissipated by the mopping-up activities of a victorious spring sun which (sign of an oftentimes too optimistic hope) had brought bicycles out on the campus. The gym windows stood wide to air out the place for the sophomore-senior basket ball game. Sara La Lond, flushed with exercise and vivid as a young animal, came out and made for Suite Twenty, Trumbull.

Since the day of their hitch-hike, already become a classic chapter in the unwritten history of Trumbull House, a curious and confident friendship had sprung up between Sylvia Hartnett and Sara La Lond. The brilliant, laborious and usually saturnine scholar would come to Suite Twenty when Sylvia was alone there, and sit talking at top speed and in high, if rather sardonic spirits, or smoking with a singular daintiness, a small clay pipe in a comfortable silence. Seldom did she come when the other H. B. V.'s were in. She did not like Starr—a little jealousy there, Sylvia suspected—and regarded Verity with amused but impatient incomprehension. In some unanalyzable way, Sara seemed to have blossomed since that December day. Her personality had expanded; she seemed more at ease with

herself and her world; and her work was even better than it had been. Something of the old nerve-strain was evident in her bearing, though she sedulously tried to cover it with an air of insouciance as she approached the door and entered. All three occupants were there.

"Have any of you girls heard of any papers being found around the hallways since the night of the fire drill?" she asked

"I remember there was a lot of stuff blowing around in the dark that night," said Verity.

"What have you lost?" asked Sylvia. "Not part of your prize theme?"

"No. Just some private stuff. Not specially important."

Was it accident that Starr and the freshman drifted out of the room on suddenly remembered engagements? Sara shrewdly doubted it. It was generally believed that Suite Twenty operated a code of silent signals so secret that its very medium of communication had never been discovered by any outsider. (This, by the way, added greatly to the prestige of the H. B. V. trio.) Sara was sure of it when Sylvia at once accused her.

"You're worried."

"A little. Part of a letter I was writing has gone."

"Signed?"

"No. It was a second page, typed. It must have blown off my desk when I opened my door."

"Rule 3-C—Do not open door until windows are closed and draft thus guarded against,'" quoted the other from the fire regulations.

"That's past mending. Hope no snooper picked it up."

"Was it to Mark?"

"Yes."

"Anything in it to show it was yours?"

"A reference to our hitch-hike." (Sylvia grunted; the whole campus knew of that exploit), "and a date. Tentative. No names or places. But there may have been a letter of Mark's, too. I can't find it anywhere."

"Not too good. I'll sniff around and see if I can hear anything." Upon which triply mixed metaphor the scholar started out, when her friend held her up.

"Girl, are you behaving?"

"You mean about Mark?"

"Darn Mark! I mean about overwork."

"Never felt so fit in my life."

"But you're working ten and eleven hours a day——"

"And sleeping eight hours a night. I could lick the world on that schedule."

"Why strain a tendon?" argued the other. "You've got the Alumnae Scholarship lashed."

"Yes. Maybe. Unless——"

"Unless what?"

"There are other considerations besides scholarship."

"I don't get you, Stephanie."

"Oh, well, I might set fire to the chapel or pull old Miggle's whiskers or have an illegitimate child or deliver a bolshevik address in Debate or have the wrong person find that letter——"

"But you said there were no names."

"There was that New York date. Syl, you don't happen to be going down for the week-end of the 24th, do you?"

"I was thinking of doing that very little thing; give the aged grandparents a treat."

"Take me with you."

"Of an assurance. Get your parents to write and sign up for the green ticket to have you spend the week-end with us."

"That's the difficulty," returned Sara calmly. "My parents can't write."

Understanding this to mean that there was some obstacle to the elder La Londs' making application, Sylvia inquired: "Why not?"

"They don't know how," said the finest scholar in her class calmly.

The other simply stared.

"Don't let it shock you. My father is a French Canuck, and wholly illiterate. My mother was a Portuguese Islander, and can hardly speak English. *Voilà tout!* They could get someone to write and affix their marks, but——Well, it's all false, silly pride on my part——"

"Of *course* my grandmother will write," hastily broke in the other.

"I won't really be staying with you, you know."

"You'll be more than welcome," Sylvia assured her.

"That isn't the idea. I want this week-end to myself, if you can fix it with your family."

"Sure."

This, Sylvia reflected, after the other had gone, was probably the date with Mark which was mentioned in the lost sheet of Sara's letter. And that reminded her of something she had meant to tell her. Ida McKay

had been making inquiries about the House, as to who was going away over the week-end of the 24th. That might be just Ida's prevalent inquisitiveness, or it might be something more dangerous; she'd try to remember to speak to Sara later.

(How dangerous, Sara could have told her, for that missing sheet contained these words: "No: I can't get away this week. Not before the 24th, and I ought not to come then. It isn't conscience: I haven't any about us, dear. It is work: but I'll fix that some way.")

Meantime Sylvia herself was restless and unsettled. More than a week had passed since the grilling in History Three and no word had come from Patterson Gifford. She wanted to go to him and have it out, but Starr, the strategist in all affairs of the heart, opposed the direct attack. It would put her at a disadvantage.

"What do I care!" said the wrathful girl. "I can tell him what I think of him."

"Don't you care—really?"

"No," was the stout reply.

"Then apply for a transfer from his course. That will put it up to him."

Sound advice, and ingenious. Sylvia put in her application. In the course of routine it was referred to Prof. Gifford. He sent for her.

"Why do you wish to transfer, Miss Hartnett?" His tone was professional, kindly, interested.

"I don't see that I'm getting any good out of the course."

"I agree. Your work has slumped badly."

"Then what use is there in my staying? Unless you want the satisfaction of flunking me."

"It would not be a satisfaction. It might be a necessity."

"Oh, if it's a duty, of course, you'll flunk me," she broke out. (Why did he have that power of irritating her self-control beyond endurance!)

"Undoubtedly."

His calmness was too much. Probably it covered a satyric amusement. "Conscience is your middle name, isn't it! Except when you're making love to some girl."

His face changed. He rose and closed the door of the office, then stood confronting her, his eyes hardly more than level with hers. "The basis changes. Whom am I dealing with now? Sylvia, the dawn-elf, is a very different person from Hartnett, the sloppy shirk of History Three."

"I'm not a sloppy shirk." Almost on that same spot she had gone to his arms and momentarily lost herself in a new and passionate comprehension. His eyes now, as then, had become hot and threatening. But his voice was still the instrument of his mockery.

"I think you are. And something of a cheat, too."

"Oh!"

"Did I make love to you?"

"Didn't you? I suppose you mean that I started it."

His response to this was more a grin than a smile. It began her defeat. Angrily yet wistfully she said: "You won't let a fellow get away with anything, will you!"

"Not with the stale old man-and-girl gambit. Let's deal in facts."

"All right. Why am I a cheat?"

"Because you expected me to give you good marks in return for your favors, and on that presumption you turned in a report that a high school girl might have been ashamed of. Such a procedure I can interpret only in terms of an assumed bargain. Very good: let us deal, then. Exactly what terms do you offer?"

His quiet brutality took her wholly aback. She found nothing better to say than a murmured and rather piteous: "I think you're rotten."

"Sit down, please." She took the chair which she had occupied on that morning of the early coffee. He sat opposite her, as then. He said with vigor and conviction. "Sylvia, I'm disappointed in you."

"You've told me that, already."

"Knowing you to be game physically, I thought you were game morally. I was wrong."

"I loathe you."

Impatience and compassion were in his tone. "It is not a question of what you think of me, but of what I think of you. You deserved everything that I said about your report. Didn't you? . . . Well, I'm waiting."

She maintained the silence of obstinacy.

"At least you can't deny it. But you hadn't the fortitude to stand up and take it. I'm ashamed of you."

Then she struck. "Would you have roasted me that way, if it hadn't been for what happened here, that morning?"

His demeanor changed from that of the judge to that of the self-questioner. "You think I did it to prove to myself my own——"

"Incorruptibility," she broke in.

"Or"—he had paid no heed to the interruption—"was it because it was *you*? A sort of perverse desire to hurt you; is that what you're getting at?" He seemed startled at this formulation. "Do I care that much?" he muttered.

"Not as much as for your own standards of morality."

"Even if I were in love with you, I would not favor you in class," he declared.

"The upright judge. Your favorite pose."

"And I'm by no means certain that I'm in love with you."

"That makes it unanimous!"

Her flippancy provoked no response from him. "You thought I was and you presumed upon it. There you infringed on my standard of morality; the only one I profess and practice. A poor thing, but mine own. That is no pose, Sylvia."

"I'm not sure that I even know what you're talking about." She was still nursing her resentment. "Is it some trick of faculty ethics?"

"I don't care a damn for the conventional moralities. No student of history can. The eternal verities! Forever changing their aspects in the interests of whatever perishable authority happens to be in power. The turncoats and lickspittles of man's progress upward; that is what moral codes are!" He spoke with a kind of high anger. "But there is something higher; the

light that mind hands on to mind. We've got it on our seal here at Sperry: 'Lampadia echontes.' That is the one thing that we must keep undimmed and uncorrupted."

He rose and strode about, flinging his arms wide; he, the restrained, constrained, contemptuous and sardonic ironist. The girl thrilled at this unconscious betrayal of the fire at his heart.

"Look at this place. A great woman suffered and slaved and braved the ridicule of her friends and the abuse of her contemporaries to build it. Since then women have diverted their instincts of creativeness to its purposes, and men have given the best in them to make it a force for thought and progress. What happens? You petty chitterlings, cheap flutterers, come here and make it a convenient sort of country club for the four years which you don't know how to occupy better. Waste and the frustration of high purposes. That is the final immorality, the one unpardonable sin."

Sylvia whispered to herself: "Giff, I love you."

That he should have heard it was impossible. Perhaps his hot eyes had read her lips. Perhaps his flaming soul had read her heart. His next words seemed an answer, and a denial, a return to his habitual mood of quiet contempt.

"Yes: for my fine words. And I'm belying them while I speak them, by being here with you, by letting myself become interested in you, by making love to you."

"*Are* you making love to me?" This time the words were spoken aloud, and followed, fatally, by a giggle. It was pure overstrain of nerves and emotions. But

his face changed. The dark exaltation in it died bitterly. He laughed.

"Thank you. I'm a fool, of course. I'm talking to you like a woman, and you're only a silly child. Waste!"

"I'm a woman for you, Giff."

His eyes burned again. He said composedly: "You are a Junior at Sperry, come to consult a member of the faculty on a change of course."

"I don't want to change now."

"Very well. Withdraw your application with your dean."

"Promise not to flunk me?" she was incorrigible.

"I'll undertake to flunk you at the end of this semester unless you make up that report." (So was he.)

"I sat up all night over that dam' thing. Have you been sitting up nights again?"

"Yes."

"I haven't seen any light in your office."

"Not there. When my wife is away, I work in the studio room at the top of my house."

She nodded. "Yes, don't you remember, I told you that I can see your light through the trees, from Twenty?"

"Yes: I know. . . ." Had he, too, been watching and thinking—thoughts?

"What would you do if I were to walk in on you some restless night?"

"You couldn't. The outside doors are kept locked."

"Are all doors locked in your life, Giff?" She was

as pleased by her allusive cleverness as she was startled at her daring.

He said slowly. "Not against you, if you really wanted to come in."

At that, panic fell upon Sylvia Hartnett. She turned and went away.

CHAPTER XV

For two nights and days in New York Sylvia neither saw nor heard from Sara La Lond. Mark Rainger had met them at the station and politely included Sylvia in his dinner invitation, which she as tactfully declined. She had plenty to do at the Library, working on her substitute thesis for Patterson Gifford to replace the fateful rejected one. This time she was determined to make a killing. She would show Giff what she could do when she set her mind to it!

On Sunday afternoon Sara called up. "I'm motoring back to coll."

"With Mark?"

"Yes. Want to come along?"

"No; thanks. I'll stick to the train."

"Everything all right at your end?"

"Yes. I've covered your trail. Where are you?"

"Somewhere south of Harlem and having a marvelous time," Sara laughed happily. "See you to-morrow."

That evening a belated and wettish snow set in. Recalling Mark's temperamental driving, Sylvia hoped that the pair had got a good start. But when she reached the campus next morning, she found her roommate not yet arrived. At ten o'clock Sara turned up in class, flushed and excited, coughing a little but insisting that she had not caught cold.

At midnight an intermittent tapping at the door

of Twenty roused Sylvia. Prudence Chase stood there in sandals and bath robe. Without being in the least a snooper, Prudence had a faculty of knowing what was going on, and a gift for handling troublesome situations which made her the most trusted and respected and not the least feared of the self-government officers.

"La Lond's ill," she whispered.

Sylvia grabbed her dressing gown and crossed the hall with the other.

The prize scholar lay in her bed, her face reddened and splotchy. Her lips, dry and loose, moved in an incessant whisper. She only muttered when Sylvia spoke to her.

"Oughtn't we to get her to the infirmary?" asked the girl in dismay.

Prudence shook her head. "She's talking."

The sick girl's voice took on coherence. "Oh, Mark! Help me find it. . . . Of course it was your letter. Whose else would it be? I've told you there was nobody else. There hasn't been since—since I entered college. I've looked everywhere. It must have blown out the door. . . . Part of mine, too. Why did you write me that way? It's my fault for being careless. Of course you have a right to write as you feel. But they'll find it and read it and I'll be kicked. Or if I'm not they'll disqualify me for the scholarship—unimpeachable moral character and all that, you know—and Whittall will get it. I need it so, Mark! Please help me! . . . No, your name wasn't on it. You won't be kicked. That's funny, isn't it? That ought to give you a laugh. . . . Don't you care, dear! It really was my

fault for not burning it. Good moral character; 'Applicant must be of unimpeachable moral character.' I'm not, you know. We're not. Are we? . . . I'm not blaming you, dear. You mustn't blame yourself, either, or be sorry. There's nothing to be sorry about, unless I lose the Alumnae, and maybe I wouldn't have got it anyway. I'm not sorry; not a bit. I wanted to stay; Yes, even that first time. . . . Oh, well, a girl has to pretend. Isn't it silly? But I'm telling the truth now. Any time after that first night in your cottage when we sat up all night and talked. Yes, even then, if you'd asked me. Sylvia can tell you. She was shocked. . . . No, no, don't say anything to her about it. Don't say anything to anybody. They'd find out about us and I'd be kicked. For not being respectable. You're respectable, aren't you, Mark dear? But how can you be if I'm not? . . . Long before that. Long, long before. They'd look back and find out about it and I'd be kicked. Professor Gifford knows about it; anyway he suspects. Not about us, but what happened long ago. He'll never tell. He's a sport, Giff is. He believes in brains; that's all he does believe in. Pretty good religion—what? Everybody knew at home. I was only a kid then. I didn't know what it was all about. That oughtn't to count, ought it? It does, though. It makes you not respectable. No matter how much of a kid you were. I don't understand about that, do you? It's different from anything else you do. If you're sick you can get well, and if you're dirty you can get clean again. But if once you're not respectable you can never get respectable again. Funny world. Funny rule. Did you make that rule,

Mark? Or was it God? I guess it was the trustees. They're terribly respectable or of course they wouldn't be trustees."

Prudence at the window said: "How can we take her to the infirmary and have them hear . . . ?"

"What'll we do? She looks awful."

"I thought you could get Dr. Rathbun while I stay with her."

Even this much would be imperiling the official's position. Sylvia recalled with remorse some of her too-sweeping strictures on the "godhoppers" in which category she had listed all student officials. The hot, quick voice from the bed began to whimper. It became childish and pleading.

"I never! Honest, I didn't. Not if you was to send me to the principal a hundred times. . . . I don't care what Johnny Barto said. Johnny Barto's a liar." Then with a sob, "I only did it because all the rest did." There followed a revelation of early school days that terrified and sickened the unwilling listeners until the swollen eyes opened and another voice, a woman's voice said clearly: "Not after that, ever, until you, Mark. It was terribly hard sometimes. It is when you're not—quite—respectable. You see, you know so much, and that makes it hard."

"Sara! Wake up! You musn't."

"That's Sylvia. Ask her. She'll tell you. She'll tell you that I couldn't take your money. Not now. It would make everything horrid between us. . . . Is that you, Syl?"

"Yes, dear. Lie quiet. I'm going for the doctor."

She hurried out and was back in twenty minutes with the young physician.

Dr. Rathbun was known to be reliably secretive; he had handled too many of those confidential cases which are common in a college town, not to have deserved his reputation. The patient greeted him upon his entrance.

"Mark! How did you get here? It's no use your coming, dear. I am not going to marry you. I don't want to marry any one, not even you. I couldn't belong to any one that way. Why can't you let things go on as they are, dear? Oh, *no*; I couldn't take your money. . . . I'll drop out a year and make some money and then come back if they'll let me. If they haven't found the letter. . . . You know you put too much salt on the steak and made us laugh and that's what began it all."

The physician quieted her and, after examination pronounced it a severe case of tonsillitis with high fever. Infirmary in the morning. But not until the delirium broke. He understood. Sylvia sent Prudence Chase to bed and sat out the night with the sick girl.

Four days later Sara, back in her room, was smoking unpermitted cigarettes with her friend.

"You gave yourself away the other night when you were light in the bean, old girl."

"Did I?" Sara was undisturbed.

"About money. How much do you need to get through?"

"More than I'm likely to pick up in the road."

"We had a conference on it in Twenty. D'you mind?"

"Yes. What if I do?"

"I'm to blame then. I couldn't see any harm. Starr and Vee and I figured out that between us we could raise the wind a couple of hundred."

The scholar shook her dark, sleek head. "I won't take it. Anyway it wouldn't get me through."

"What would?"

"Not less than five or six hundred."

"Then I think you ought to take it from Mark."

"Would you take it from Giff?" retorted the other.

"It isn't the same."

"You mean it hasn't gone as far—yet."

"No."

"If it had?"

The thought dizzied Sylvia a little, thus suddenly brought out into the glare of plain speech. She tried to free her brain of pictures, to clear her blood of the insistent pounding of her heart. "If I'd gone that far," she said, "I don't think anything else would matter."

"Don't go that far," advised the other calmly.

"Why not?" Sylvia was curious to get an outside viewpoint.

"It wouldn't do—for you."

"Why not for me if——"

"If for me," supplied the other. "I'm different." Her swift, graceful, abandoning gesture marked a difference that was more than temperamental; that was racial.

"Has it done you any harm? Would you want it undone?"

"If I could go back to the beginning? My God, yes!"

Sylvia was struck with a sense of tragic injustice somewhere. "As far as Mark goes, no. It doesn't matter."

"Are you in love with him?"

"I suppose so. In a way. When I'm with him I am."

"And that's why you won't let him help you?"

"I can't bear the thought of money coming into it."

"If you were married to him you'd take it."

"That's the reason why I won't marry him; one reason."

"He's asked you, hasn't he?"

"Yes. From the very first time."

"I think you're an awful fool, La Lond."

"Maybe I am. But I can't endure the thought of giving myself up permanently and becoming part of some one else's life. There's a part of me that wants to, but that's only nerves. I can compromise with that. I want to study and travel and know things and find out what it's all about. That's what my mind wants and I'm not going to let my body bully me into doing something else. There are times when I wish to God I hadn't been born a woman, and there are other times when—when I don't wish that at all. Life's something of a mess for a girl like me, Syl."

"I'd take Mark Rainger's money and finish my course," persisted her friend. "It isn't as if you had done what you did for the money. Of course you wouldn't do that."

"Wouldn't I!" retorted the scholar somberly. "Girl, I'm going to shock you."

"Try and do it!"

"There's a middle-aged man who has been pretty nice

to me, and he'd have paid my way through in a minute. He was crazy about me."

"What was the price?"

"There wouldn't have been any bargain. He wasn't that kind. But I wouldn't have taken it from him without giving a return. I'd about figured it out to spend spring vacation with him——"

"Sara! You couldn't do that!"

"You don't know. There isn't anything I wouldn't do to finish my course here. At least I thought so till I met Mark. Then the other thing was all off."

"You *are* in love with him. And you're a perfect damn fool if you don't marry him."

"And get kicked for sure?"

"Secretly, then, till after you graduate, you imbecile. It's been done before. Remember Sequoia Martin in '25?"

The prospective valedictorian shook her head. "No. I'll go on as we are. For a time, anyway. It won't last." A wry smile twisted her features. "Too many people know about my over-picturesque past. When I was giving an imitation of the Ravings of John McCullough did I touch on my happy childhood days?"

"Yes."

"You must have got an earful."

"I tried not to listen."

Sara went to her locked trunk and produced a large envelope which she handed to the other. "The eye is less shockable than the ear," she observed. "Take that home and try it on yours, some time."

"What is it?"

"It is," returned her friend with a grin of sorts,

"a document of Extreme Sociological Importance. So extreme, in fact, that nobody will print it. I sent it to the most solemn and serious of the pedagogical magazines and they returned it with shrieks of editorial horror. So unless I land it in one of the 'private confession' type of publications it will perish, unread." She abandoned her tone of raillery. "There's stuff in there that ought to be studied by every family with a girl in it and every teacher in every school."

"Is it about your own experiences?" asked Sylvia fascinated.

"Yes."

"Not under your own name?"

"I don't want it to be. But I'll even go that far to get it published. God! How could it do a millionth part of the harm that letting these things go on unknown does?"

"But do they go on, much?"

"I don't suppose the mill town where I went to public school was so different from a lot of other mill towns. I was 'ruined'—that's the term, though I don't see what meaning it has for a kid—when I was thirteen. It was quite casual; as much my fault as the boy's, I expect. Curiosity and the lack of any intelligent information, because I was 'too young to learn about those things.' Well, I learned! It meant very little to me in one way; didn't register, you might say; but it gave me a thrill of excited superiority to the other girls till I found out that half the class knew as much about it as I did, or more. To be sure, most of them were a couple of years older than I."

"Sara! What ever were the teachers thinking of?"

"Something else, I expect," was the bitter response. "One of the younger teachers did make a fuss. It cost her her job. She was 'casting slurs on the school.' The rest either didn't know or were afraid to let on that they did, except one of the men teachers. He knew too much."

"You don't mean that he was. . . ."

"Yes. Not entirely his fault. He fell for the girl who was the ringleader. She was a fifteen-year-old devil, precocious physically and a moron in every other way. She corrupted the boys of the class. That kind of girl isn't so uncommon; I've heard of other cases. She went after the teacher on a bet and got him. There was a scandal—hushed up, of course, for the good name of the school—and he disappeared, ran away and afterwards committed suicide. Well, those things spread; there was a kind of rivalry about it. It ran through my class, particularly. By the time we graduated more than half of us were 'unchaste,' 'ruined,' 'not respectable.' Would you have known it on me," concluded the narrator bitterly, "if I hadn't told you?"

"It doesn't seem to have any meaning," replied Sylvia slowly, "in your case. I can't see that you are 'ruined'; not in any essential."

"Because I had a faculty of keeping the two sides of me distinct. Perhaps that's my Latin blood. And I had a passion for learning, for knowing things. That helped, too. But I'm conscious, just the same, of being different from the rest of the girls here."

"That's rot. You're not different. What you did hasn't cost you your self-respect or changed you in any

important way. It's just something that has passed and is over with."

The other looked at her darkly. "You don't know. Those things do leave a mark. They make it harder—you know too much—you think too much—it rouses something in you—your natural inhibitions are gone—and then you think, 'What does it matter what I do?' I did keep straight after I came to college; but there were times when I was almost crazy. Then Mark came. But I'm not ashamed of that."

"Have you ever told Mark?"

"No. Why should I?"

"Wouldn't he understand?"

"Oh, probably. It's easier for a man to understand a girl like me than for another girl, I guess; but—there's always that 'but' with a man. It would only hurt Mark."

"Giff knows something, doesn't he?"

Sara's eyes burned upon her friend. "Has he told you?"

"Don't be a sap! Of course not. But I know that he came from your town and he asked me to—well, to kind of stand by you when you were having a bad time of it."

"Giff's not a bad sort. He deserves more than he's ever got from this place."

"Do you think I ought to leave coll?" asked Sylvia abruptly.

"Why? On account of Giff?"

"Yes. While it's still at the halfway point with us."

"Those things usually stop halfway."

"I don't get that. I don't believe I'm the halfway

type of girl. And you warned me not to go through with this."

"Yes. On Giff's account as much as your own."

"How do you know it wouldn't be—worth while?" queried the other perversely.

"You're the one to answer that—and Giff."

"Hasn't it been with you and Mark?"

"Yes; but that's different. You've never had any experience."

Sylvia grinned impishly. "It strikes me that experience might be a good thing to have. And who would be a better source of wisdom than a faculty?"

"Oh, well! If you're only joking about it all," said Sara, relieved. She knew how many girls "take it out in talk," and thus find relief for pent emotionalism.

"Sure!" said Sylvia.

CHAPTER XVI

ENGLISH FIVE was Sylvia Hartnett's special aversion. She considered that there was something phony about it and about its presiding genius, Prof. Violet Shenstone, a gushy and rigidly opinionated spinster of fifty whose passion for the poetry of Shelley rose so far above her other vapid enthusiasms that imaginative scandal-mongers among the undergraduates had assigned her a former existence wherein her relations to the poet had been decidedly informal. Reaching her ears, this delighted her secretly but greatly. She was understood to be gestating for publication a critique upon her favorite genius.

Belatedly Sylvia was working up her Oral on Shelley for Miss Shenstone's class. Each pupil was expected to be ready to discuss, with illuminating commentary and apt comparison, any one of ten poems designated in advance, which meant, of course, that they were to echo the instructress's ardors and chaste ecstasies—if they aspired to good marks. Sylvia desired the marks, but she was no devotee of Shelley at best, and she now discovered in herself a positive dislike for what she had once heard Patterson Gifford refer to as his "laborious saccharinities." The more she dug into the ten selections, the more she appreciated that acid phrase and the more rancorous became her resentment toward the dead

songster and his faculty adorer. She had a pat foreboding that she would draw "To a Skylark."

"And if Old Shinbone dishes out the usual hooley about expressing our opinions frankly and fully," she told her roommates, the light of schism, secession, and heresy glowing in her eye, "and I get the bloomin' Skylark for mine I'm going to pull the tailfeathers out of the dam' bird!"

A bored class gathered rather late and listened perfunctorily to Miss Shenstone's oft-repeated exhortation to frankness, originality, and freedom of expression, then rose, girl after girl, and sing-songed their quotations, offering safe and sane comparisons with Keats and Coleridge, after the approved manner of mark-hunters. The hour was half over when the professor suavely called for Miss Hartnett's analysis of what she termed "our poet's highest flight of genius. Your own authentic analysis and opinion, if you please, Miss Hartnett, not a mere rehash of the pronouncements of others."

Well, fate had handed it to her; let fate be responsible. Sylvia drew a long breath and said:

"I think it's rotten."

There was a blank, terrified, incredulously delighted silence, accentuated by a single titter instantly suppressed. The sour virginality of Miss Shenstone's countenance turned a yellowish white. "Rotten?" she repeated faintly. Then, explosively, "Rotten! And," with deadly quietude, "may one ask the basis of this ripe judgment?"

The girl's color rose. "It may not be ripe, but it's honest. I think the poem is just plain sloppy and slip-

shod. The stuff is all wet and the rhymes are punk."

Miss Shenstone's chair creaked under the impact of her spare shoulder blades as she threw herself back like an offended cat. "This is interesting, indeed. The class would, I am sure, be enlightened by hearing my own poor opinion, the fruit of a mere thirty years of study, authoritatively controverted. Proceed."

Baiting Miss Sylvia Hartnett was never a safe procedure where she felt herself within her rights; she had the Puritan pride of opinion. "Do you want me to read it?" she asked ominously.

"If you please. No." The pedagogue reversed herself. "If it is to be read we will insure a sympathetic rendition. Miss Reynolds."

Esther Reynolds, the best elocutionist in the class and always on the side of the angels, got eagerly to her feet and with an appropriately ecstatic smile began:

*"Hail to thee, blithe spirit,
Bird thou never wert,
That from heaven, or near it
Pourest thy full heart—
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art."*

"Urt," amended Sylvia.

"Huh?" queried the reciter, startled.

"If it's wert, it ought to be urt," explained the critic blandly. "Also hurt, not heart."

"But it can't be urt and hurt. It doesn't make any sense that way," protested the interpreter.

"That's Shelley's lookout, not yours," rejoined Sylvia severely. "Be yourself and stick to the rhyme."

Miss Shenstone was afterward alleged to have said in a failing voice: "This is too outrageous," but the protest was lost in Miss Hartnett's follow-up.

"Anyway, the sense is just as sloppy as the sound. "Unpremeditated art!" I suppose all the rest of the skylarks were sitting around in the grass premeditating their art—I mean urt—and only Shelley's got up and did his stuff unpremeditated. It's like that poem the Sweet Singer of Michigan wrote about 'The Unostentatious Potato.' I'll bet she got her inspiration from Shelley."

"Are you quite finished?" came the icy inquiry from the rostrum.

But Sylvia had the bit in her teeth. "No; I'm not. Look at the rest of the poem. There's hardly a stanza that hasn't got a sour rhyme or two in it. Read 'em and weep! Even—heaven, flight—day-light, sphere—there, cloud—overflowed, wrought—not, leaves—gives, grass—was, know—now, and so on. Pity somebody didn't give Percy a rhyming dictionary for Christmas. If you ask me, I don't believe that stuff would get by to-day in the Sperry Spotlight."

Miss Shenstone was now looking gray and hollow about the jaws. "I trust that Hartnett on Shelley is about concluded," she said with still malevolence.

"You asked for a free expression of opinion," urged the rebel, "and I'm giving it to you." ("Shuttup, yourself, Roxy Ann." This to Rosanne Merrick who was tugging frantically at her dress and imploring her to stop.) "When he does pull a correct one, it's the same old stock jingle-jangle that has been running double since Noah first paired up the rhymes and sent 'em

aboard the ark, two-and-two; art—heart, loud—cloud, thee—see, tower—bower and shower—flower, fountains—mountains, gladness—madness; all the mildewed old vaudeville teams are out there doing their stuff.”

The professor broke in. “Your views are, I fear, too advanced for this simple company. We can dispense with them from now on—and with you.”

“You mean I’m dropped?” Sylvia’s eyes were fixed upon Miss Shenstone.

“I am sure that you can find no further profit in such poor instruction as this class can offer.”

“You particularly invited us,” said the girl hotly, “to say what——”

“I did not give you permission to insult our intelligence. You may withdraw.”

Sylvia walked to the door. There she turned. “I’m glad I’m through with your class,” she said clearly. “It’s the worst bunk in college.” And she left behind her a rising hum and buzz that would not be stilled.

Righteous wrath induces tears in some girls; in others, the sulks; in still others a feminine form of running amuck chiefly expressed in hurling clothing and bric-à-brac around the room. In Sylvia it inspired a coolly savage desire to do something desperate and determinative. That her case would be cited before the faculty was certain. Old Shinbone would be just that venomous over the double insult to herself and her god.

Probably an apology would be demanded, for her final speech had been deliberately and provocatively offensive. Let ’em demand! She wouldn’t apologize. She wouldn’t! Damned if she would! Not even if it meant expulsion. It might well mean that, too, for

Shenstone would make a special point of the breach of decorum, and Sylvia's record was none too good. Hers was that take-it-for-granted independence of spirit which, to the more touchy pedagogical mind seems sheer insubordination. Well, let 'em expel! Or, what if she forestalled action by resigning and giving her reasons publicly? How could she give them the greatest possible currency? She recalled the tradition of a rebel far back in 1912 who had posted her frank impressions of the faculty on the college bulletin board where it had remained long enough to create a very superior scandal. Something more original would have better suited Sylvia's mood. Something like hiring an airship to let fall over the campus a gentle rain of dodgers, publishing to the collegiate world an untrammelled expression of her wrongs and her resentment? Apropos of rain she now perceived that she was pacing the campus in a steady downpour. She retired to Twenty to dry out.

Conversation on the subject of her probable fate received small encouragement from its subject when her roommates returned in high excitement.

"What did you want to kick out like a wild ass of the desert for?" said Starr disgustedly.

"Shinbone had it coming to her. She makes me sick."

"Callow exhibitionism, my child," was the superior diagnosis of her classmate.

"Forget it, can't you?"

"Get off your shoes and stockings and go and lie down, Syl," advised Verity, and got only a low growl for her pains. But the other accepted the suggestion.

All the rest of the day she drew spiritually more

and more aloof, became more and more self-centered upon her unlucky outbreak. Too late she began to realize that she had reacted not to a righteous literary indignation against Miss Shenstone, but to the irritant of her own rasped nerves. Nor was the nerve-rasp due to her instructor. It had its origin deep within herself. She felt herself wondering with a sort of angry sympathy, how much of the spinster's arid enthusiasms and acerbities were due to long-endured suppressions. But she would not apologize. There was in the girl leaven of the unyielding and unlovely Puritan obstinacy of spirit which can be as dogged against right as against wrong.

She went to bed early. Toward midnight, after much restless tossing, she found herself broad awake. She got up, put on a dressing gown, tiptoed into the living room and sat there in the dark, sadly and consciously pitying herself; then, less artificially, feeling something of the panic of the lost as she contemplated a life severed from the companionships of Twenty, of Trumbull, of Sperry itself. No avail to tell herself that she hated the place; it only caused gulpy sensations in the throat. She wandered to the window and looked out into the darkness.

The warm, smooth rain whispered memories to her. A soft breeze divided the branches of the tree before her and, as if it had parted the darkness, too, she saw, for a vivid instant, the glow of a distant and unforgotten light.

Giff's light. In his tower room. And Giff there alone and at work. Or perhaps thinking of her, Sylvia. Perhaps wanting her. No; not perhaps; she knew with

an absolute certainty. And as if his light had been a clear call to her through the darkness, she went back to her room, slipped on her slicker and oilskin cap, found a pair of overshoes (they were Verity's and a little large for her) and went out and down the stairs. This was the end of her college life; she would make it a fulfillment, and the beginning of a new and warmer living.

She descended the stairs and let herself out at the window of an empty ground floor room. The night and the soft rain folded her about with an invisible cherishing.

A few minutes later Ida McKay dropped to the lawn and cast about her in the murk. She had heard and seen and now, with a definite motive, hoped to verify suspicions which she had slowly formulated concerning Sylvia Hartnett and Patterson Gifford.

CHAPTER XVII

BENEATH the high, golden window the earth was miry with rain. Sylvia muddled her fingers well before she found a pebble to throw. Practiced in baseball, she sent her shot true. The sash slid up; a dark outline blotted the light. Sylvia's whisper—it was all that she could manage in her sudden, inner tumult—was lost in the soft cataract of the rain. Patterson Gifford's voice said:

"The side door."

The side door! She flinched back for a moment. Were his words symbolic, prophetic? Must her entrance to this new phase of life be through a side door? After this would she whose pride it had always been to go straight and openly to her objective, be committed to the furtivity of secret entries? She wrenched her mind from the clogging thought, her feet from the clogging mud. What did it matter, the way of entry? What really mattered was that which lay on the further side of doors.

She stepped into a dim hallway. He drew off her raincoat, touched her hand, her cheek. "You're cold."

She said excitedly: "I've lost one of my overshoes."

"Shall I look for it?"

"No, I can only stay a minute."

"That's a futile thing to say" he returned gravely.

She laughed. "Absolutely."

"Come up."

Sylvia followed him to the tower room. A weak fire was struggling for life on the hearth. He busied himself mending it while she settled into a chair and looked curiously about.

"This isn't a bit as I'd imagined it. I love the disorder of it."

"My life has been rather disordered lately," was the quiet rejoinder.

"Hasn't it ever been before?"

"Not to this degree."

"You mean that I've done it, Giff?"

"Yes. It's not your fault, though."

She leaned to the fire, smoothing back her wet, abundant hair with both hands, a gesture which subtly carried an effect of occupancy, of making the place her own. He went quickly to her, as quickly turned away and bumped himself down upon an ottoman with some violence.

"Sylvia, we've got to talk, you and I."

Slowly she turned her head. "Have we? Why?" Her voice was no more than a dreaming whisper.

"Don't look at me that way!" His throat twitched over the words. "If you do I'll kiss you and then it'll be too late for talk."

She made no reply; only regarded the fire with thoughtful eyes and unafraid. But her brain was racing in wide speculation. She was on the verge of experience. Experience! Which of the other girls had had it? And what effect had it upon them? Nothing palpable. Nothing that would enable one to separate the goats from the sheep, the Class X girls from the

Class V. Starr, for instance. With her independence and courage she was a law unto herself. Sara? But Sara had eaten of the fruit of the tree of knowledge when she was still a child. Vee? No; not Vee. She was by nature a Sainte Nitouche. Nixie? Too selfish. Pink? Too conservative. Gwen? Too cautious, for all her boastful talk. Ida? She laughed. Prue? Not enough sex to her. Elsie? Too unimaginative. Funny, thought Sylvia, that in almost every case chastity seemed to be connected not with some fine and positive but with some weak and niggling quality. What was the answer? Was virtue no more than a timid denial? Was she herself wise or a fool. "Wise virgin"—a paradox perhaps. Could one be a virgin and wise? A memory of valorous song came to her:

*"Nor shall the flaming forts be won
By sneaking negatives alone."*

Worth a thousand of Shelley's unpremeditating skylarks, that trumpet-call. Shelley! And Miss Shenstone, his belated soul-paramour. And her own plight, between the two of them. Should she tell Giff about it? He at least would sympathize with her right to her own opinion. He would——

"Let's be sure that we understand each other, Sylvia." His voice, breaking in upon her thoughts, had hardened to its accustomed precision. "You're not a child. You haven't come here in ignorance of what your coming implies."

She shook her head. On her lips hovered a small, undaunted smile.

"Very likely you've heard talk about me," he pursued. "You know"—rather contemptuously—"I don't profess the usual collegiate conventions. I'm not what is called a moral man."

For some obscure reason this annoyed her. "How do you know that I'm a moral girl?"

"Have I ever assumed that you were?" was the quiet retort.

To her utter chagrin she, who never cried, burst into choky tears. He jumped to his feet and loomed over her, threateningly, it seemed to her quivering mind.

"Then you are," he said.

"I won't tell you," she sobbed.

"You needn't. I think I knew it all the time, in my heart." He spoke with a slow and tender gravity. "And that makes it the more essential that there should be no room for misunderstanding between us."

"I'm sorry I made a fool of myself just now, Giff."

He turned away, walked twice up and down the breadth of the room, and stood facing her from the hearth. "What I am trying to say to you is that I do not measure morals and behavior by the commonly accepted yardstick. I have certain standards—such as most people mistakenly call morals—and I try to live up to them. At least up to now I have tried. But you—this—is quite beyond them. And I don't seem to care. But I want one point clear between us. In these affairs it is always the girl who is supposed to be lured to her ruin and all that sort of rot, and to take all the risk while the villain, man, gets off scot free. I want to be sure that your eyes are open to all the possibilities for us both, Sylvia; and I want to point out that the

risk and the danger run equal for both of us. If we should be discovered, even now before anything decisive has occurred, it would mean the collapse of my structure of life quite as much as of yours."

"Yes, Professor," said Sylvia with malicious meekness.

He drew a sharp breath. "I am telling you this in an effort to be quite fair."

"Do you want me to go back?"

"I love you," he said.

She stood up. "Couldn't you have left the rest of it out?" she murmured.

Against the look on his face she shut her eyes; shut them the better to feel his strength enclose her, his breath steal her own breathing; then his kisses, slow, soft, wounding kisses that bruised something deep within her with a hurt sweeter than delight, leaving her helpless for denial, even had she had the wish to deny.

The fire, leaping, whispered and exulted. Sylvia lost sense of time and space.

A clock struck. Sylvia stirred in her lover's arms. "I think I've been asleep," she marveled.

He laughed. "You have. Nearly an hour."

"That's funny." She pressed her cool cheek to his, then drew herself gently free and walked over to the window. "Twenty seems very far away; whole centuries away. Maybe it was a century that I slept instead of an hour." She peered through the leaves. "There's a light there. I must have left it. Or maybe Starr is up and worrying about where I am. Wouldn't she be surprised! I ought to go back, but I don't want to go back." She seated herself at his desk, wedged

his working glasses upon her delicate nose, wrinkling it under the burden, fussed among his papers. "Here's where you mete out fate, like a god, to us poor earthlings. Is this Ida McKay's written? I'll bet it's punk."

"Pretty awful," he agreed. He came and bent over her. "The gentle Ida believes that there are other and easier ways than honest toil."

"In your course? I believed that once—and look at the darn thing now! What's 'Only-me's' idea?"

"Something in the line of blackmail. If she could look into this room now it would be very much in her line."

"What does she know, the sneaky little snooper?" asked Sylvia.

"She doesn't know anything. She suspects that I take a more than academic interest in you. And she has darkly hinted at reasons why I should be lenient to her manifold failings, as far as she dared."

"How far was that?"

"Not very far."

She looked up at the tyrant chin, said "I should suppose not," and kissed it. "You do need a shave, Giff. What time is it?"

"Two-twenty."

She sighed. "I suppose I ought to go."

"Four-twenty is just as safe as two-twenty."

"That's a powerful thought," she agreed gayly. "Give the fire a little encouragement then."

While he was coaxing the embers she sat musing. Out of her meditation was born a query: "Giff, do all affairs like ours end in disaster?"

"All human affairs end in disaster. Death takes care of that."

"A cheery soul, you are!"

"I never set up for an optimist."

"Don't you believe in anything?" she asked with a note of wistfulness.

"Yes. Will you understand me when I tell you that the one thing I do believe in, as in a gospel, is the pursuit of that eternal fugitive called truth." She thrilled to his quiet exaltation, for this was his inner heart that he was opening to her. "Probably I shall never so much as catch sight of her 'flying tress and fluttering hem.' If I did, how can I know that I should even recognize her?"

"Why shouldn't you?" asked the girl jealously.

"Better men than I have passed her, unknowing."

"Then what's the use of it all?" came her passionate demand.

"We have to try. That's part of the creed. I know that I can teach; that I can excite minds to want to know, which is the essence of teaching. And perhaps some day it may be given to me to stimulate some mind that might later catch a revealing glimpse of the Splendid Fugitive."

"Sara La Lond?" she asked.

"It's just possible."

"That's why you're anxious that she should keep straight." She had not meant to say so much but the words were too quick for her.

He shook his head. "I'm not interested in her morals. I'm interested in her mind. What she does with

her life is for her to decide, but she mustn't take any risk of spoiling her chances."

"You don't believe in anything but mind, do you, Giff?"

"You've made me believe in that illusion which is happiness."

"I'll never disillusion you," she promised softly.

"Yet disillusionment may be only a synonym for wisdom—in the minor key."

"In novels," she reflected, "there's always a crash in this sort of thing."

"Because our writers cater to the social demand that they shall buttress the cause of morals. Rule A: if it's immoral, then it must end tragically. No continental writer is bound to any such false propaganda, any more than the ancient Greeks were, or the best of the Romans. Their concern is with life and their conscience is to reflect life as they see it. But our prim little story tellers are afraid of the censors and still more afraid of the market; for them it is either the wedding ring or poetic justice and apt punishment, carefully manufactured for the trade. They are the false prophets and weak bulwarks of a fake morality. History is fairer. It recognizes that marriage is a modern makeshift, not an eternal morality. It may be the most flagrant immorality. . . . Forgive the pedant for bursting into a lecture. You brought it on yourself."

Ever personal, the woman said: "Was your marriage that?"

"Mine? It grew to be."

"What did you do it for?"

"Well, it seemed a sort of safeguard to be married." He added gloomily; "It wasn't."

She said with an effort but with an unwavering regard upon him:

"Giff; has there been any one else in college, ever, but me?"

"No!"

"It's silly of me but I'm glad of that."

"There are temptations for a man in a woman's college; special temptations. I've always kept clear of them. I've had the feeling that anything of the sort would be a betrayal of my job, of my capacity for usefulness here; and that is a thousand times more to me than any consideration of conventions or morality. That is my morality, the duty of getting something done in the world that you can do better than the other fellow. And I'm risking that now—and when I look at you I don't give a damn."

"I think I'm glad that you feel that way. It makes it evenner for us both."

At the door, as she was leaving he drew her back jealously into his arms. "Sylvia, I want you to tell me something honestly."

"Yes, dear."

"Are you sorry?"

"Not a bit. She gave voice to a typically feminine vaunt incomprehensible to man's more limited understanding. "I'm *never* sorry after a thing is done."

He slipped through the door with her and spoke in a tone more moved, more moving than she had ever heard from him. "My dear; somewhere out there in

the darkness is Something that men, in their own darkness, call God. I don't know whether It takes cognizance of our little mortal fates. But if It does, I ask It as the one and only favor I have ever asked, to make me responsible alone for what has happened between us two."

"He won't," said Sylvia with soft conviction. "He knows that women are the enduring sex."

His kiss was still warm on her young lips when she crept into Twenty. Starr stirred in bed, sat up, and scowled at her.

"This is a sweet night to be hoboing around in."

"It's a *beautiful* night."

"Is that rain or is Momma a deaf-mute? Where do you get that 'beautiful' stuff? What's biting you, girl?"

The truant considered the question and grinned. "Percy Bysshe Shelley if you trace it back far enough."

"And you've gone mad from the bite. Where's your other overshoe?"

"Oh, Lordy! I forgot. It's Vee's and it's stuck in the mud in Giff's yard."

"*Giff's*? Are you crazy? Have you been serenading Giff?"

"You might call it that."

Starr sat up in bed and stared at her roommate with a touch of panic. "Syl Hartnett, what have you been doing?"

"I'll dare you to guess."

"Have you really been at Giff's?"

"Yes."

"Inside the house?"

"You wouldn't expect me to stay outside, a night like this."

"*All* night?"

"All but what's left."

"Syl!"

The younger girl met the other's eyes unflinchingly. Her half-smile was tender, confident, betraying. "I don't care. I'm terriby in love with him and terribly happy, Starr."

Starr began to cry.

"Don't be a baby," said the truant indignantly. "You did it first. Why should you throw a fit about me?"

"I—never—did," sobbed Starr.

Sylvia stared. "Why, you as good as told me. The night you stayed at Lloyd's with your Fritzie-officer."

"I know. But I didn't," wept her friend. "I—I meant to but I got so scared, and he was *sweet* about it and he held me in his arms all night on the sofa—and that was all."

"Then why did you let me think you had?"

"Just boasting," answered Starr in a small and dismal confessional squeak. "I was ashamed of having crawfished after all my talk. I thought you'd think I was yellow—and I guess I was. And now maybe you wouldn't have—have gone there to-night if you hadn't thought I'd done it first. I'll never forgive myself."

"Stop it! You'll wake Vee up."

"I never thought of any harm," pursued the mourner. "I wish I had gone through with it now. Then I wouldn't—you wouldn't——"

"What you did has nothing to do with what I did,"

broke in Sylvia sturdily. For all that, she felt a little shaken, a little alone in a new and adventurous world. "And I'm not sorry. Not a bit."

"That's because you're still drunk with it," said Starr with unexpected analysis.

"No. Because I'm in love with him. If you'd been really in love with your Fritizie then it would have been yellow for you to back out after you'd gone so far."

"But what's going to come of it?" wailed the other softly.

"I don't know and I don't care. But I wish I had Vee's golosh back."

"I'll get up at daylight and get it," promised the remorseful one, eager to do something in the way of reparation.

At daylight no overshoe was there.

CHAPTER XVIII

CANDOR in a high degree marked the demeanor of "Only" Ida McKay as she held up Verity in the hallway going to breakfast.

"Lost anything, Vee?"

"No." The freshman did not care much for Ida.

"Oh! I thought maybe you had on account of the initials in it."

"What's got my initials in it?"

"Only a golosh that I found."

"Don't know anything about it. Haven't had mine on for a week."

She gave it no further thought until her return to Twenty when she looked and found one lone overshoe. "What d'you suppose the answer is?" she inquired of the other H. B. V.'s.

Starr's concerned eyes sought Sylvia's. "I snitched 'em last night for a little prowl," explained the latter, "and lost one in the mud."

"Then I'll get it from McKay." Verity asked no question. She never asked questions.

"Has Ida got any line on who wore them?" asked Starr as the door closed behind the freshman.

"I thought I heard something stirring in her room when I made my sneak."

"Oh, Syl!"

"Why the Ethel Barrymore voice, old girl? I'm due

to be kicked anyway, aren't I, for the battle with old Shinbone?"

"Not necessarily. But if Ida knows and wants to be nasty . . ."

"It'll certainly give her something to work on. The filthy little shrimp must have trailed me. Swell for Giff!"

"I don't care about Giff——"

"Well, I do. He'll be kicked, too." Sylvia laughed bitterly. "Trust him to have the right slant on things. He told me; 'I've got just as much at stake as you have.' No fake chivalry about him. He doesn't chivvle for a damn. That's one of the things I love about him. Oh, Starr, I don't *want* him mixed up in this."

"What can you do?" said the other helplessly. "If you could think up some good explanation for——"

"For McKay? Oh, sure! I'll tell her I was practicing a roundelay on the jewsharp under Giff's window. She'll believe that. Easy!"

Verity entered bearing the lost article. "What I want to know," she proclaimed, "is how that cat of an Ida knew this was mine."

"Your initials, didn't she say?"

"She did. And she lied. Find 'em."

Starr whistled. "Deep river!"

"Not so deep," retorted Sylvia sapiently. "She never thought it was yours. She figured that when she put it up to you you'd say 'That isn't mine; it's Syl's,' which would be added proof for her case."

"Then she didn't actually see you there," surmised Starr as Verity went out. "But what is her case?"

"Simple enough. She's due to flunk in History C and knows it. Giff is ready to throw her out any day on her rotten class work. So if she can get something on him, she thinks she can put it over." She began to chuckle. "I'd like to be there when she goes up against him. He'll murder her."

"He'll pass her," contradicted Starr quietly.

"He will not. He couldn't. I'd despise him if he did."

"I'd despise him if he didn't. He's got to, to save you."

"I don't want him to save me," said the other vehemently. "You don't know how he feels about academic integrity and honesty and those things. It's his religion. I've got to see him and warn him about Ida."

"You'd better keep away from Giff," warned Starr.

Sylvia's face warmed. "I haven't the slightest intention of keeping away from him," she answered with soft obstinacy.

"Oh, I don't mean break it off; I didn't suppose you would, though it's the only wise thing. But just as a matter of safety you oughtn't to see him for a while."

Whatever Sylvia's intentions, she had no opportunity of seeing Patterson Gifford alone for several days. In fact, she suspected that he was avoiding her for reasons which she attributed to caution. Coming and going on her collegiate affairs, she enjoyed and ignored the hushed consideration of the doomed. Few but believed that Prof. Shenstone would insist upon expulsion, unless full apology were offered, so flagrant had been the challenge to authority. Sylvia, believing her case hopeless, was surprised to find that she was not vitally

concerned about it. Her experience with Patterson Gifford so filled her thoughts, her imaginings, called upon her for such readjustment of theory and tradition to life, as to delegate anything else to a secondary place. But if she was expelled, how could she continue to see Giff? Some way; of that she was certain. She couldn't give him up now. Not yet anyway. Perhaps later if it became too dangerous for him. . . .

Gwen Peters brought her a piece of news which might be interpreted as indirectly hopeful in her own case. "Nixie is back."

"Back in *coll*?"

"Not yet. But the chatter is that they're going to ease her in."

"How's that?"

"The whole bacteriology bunch went to the front for her. With all her fussing, Nixie did swell work in Bac. The little bugs just naturally take to her like she was their long-lost sister. So she's living at Mrs. Terhune's, off-campus."

"She'll have to watch her step."

Gwen grinned. "Not while she's there. Got a ground floor room and old Auntie Terhune's as deaf as a post. She's pulling parties and having a swell time and working in the Lab on the quiet, unofficially, of course, to keep up until they let her back. It's a wonder to me how Nixie turns the trick; up thicketing half the night and sleeping half the day and then steps up and cracks an A in any class she's interested in. The point is, old deah, that if they let up on her, why shouldn't they do the same for you? You're a lot more popular."

"But I don't crack many A's."

"'sall right. You've got friends in the faculty, too," remarked Gwen not too obscurely.

Something had evidently slowed up the wheels of justice, for Sylvia was not summoned to the High Presence. Rumors of a conflict in Faculty Meeting passed around. Such reports have a way of getting into currency and are generally fallacious. But out of the swirl of rumor emerged certain reasonably probable facts. Patterson Gifford, it appeared, had at once constituted himself counsel for the absent criminal. Shrewdly he had called for testimony, not from Sylvia's friends, but from such pillars of discipline as Prudence Chase and Esther Reynolds, and from them had elicited the fact of Miss Shenstone's insistence upon frank expression of original opinion from the class. He pressed the point that, having invoked the spirit of academic freedom, she could hardly resent her pupils taking her at her word. One report had it that he had indicated an intention of resigning in the event of the faculty adopting a policy of suppression by making an example in the case. The outcome was said to be that the offense would be passed over with light penalties, upon suitable apology to the presiding genius of English Five.

"I'll be damned if I will," said Sylvia, furious.

This defiance she repeated to Prof. Gifford later. It was Wednesday, five days after what was already known to the college as "the Shelley shenanigan," and she was in his office by appointment.

"Not if I inform you officially that you must?"

"No."

"Not if I ask you to, Sylvia?"

"Giff, how can I? It would be too beastly cowardly."

"That *would* be a pity, wouldn't it!"

Amazed at the bitterness of his speech she said, "Do you want me to be cowardly?"

"In this case, yes."

"*Giff!* I don't understand you."

"You understand that I want you to stay in college, don't you?"

"Yes; I understand that." Her eyes softened.

"Well, I have made the way for you. Now I ask you to take it."

"But I was right. You know I was right," she persisted.

"Even if you were, what of it?"

"Well, if you want me to be downright dishonest—"

"Don't babble to me about dishonesty," he broke in.

"I'm a sweet example of it myself."

"You? Because you stood up for me?" Sylvia was floundering.

"No. I'd have done that anyway."

"Then what is it?"

"It's that deprecating little writher, McKay."

In spite of her stress of mind Sylvia could not but smile at the characterization. "What has she done?"

"She has passed my course—with flying colors," he stated with venomous self-contempt.

"You've had to pass her?" faltered the girl. "Because of—us? Because she knows?"

"She doesn't know. How could she? But she suspects and she's got enough to go on to make an impossible scandal. Therefore I have accepted the in-

evitable and hauled down my stainless colors. All the other half-wits and mewling morons in the class get the same dispensation."

"Why the others?"

"Call it the last remnants of a rotted conscience. At least I won't give it to one and not the rest. The class owes a vote of thanks to McKay. Hereafter History C will be known as a soft snap, to be joyously elected by the aspiring weak-minded. There's a cant phrase about a girl losing her virtue. Well, I've lost mine, the only virtue I ever professed, my boasted incorruptibility. And now do you think I'm going to lose you, to let you leave college because of some cheap little schoolgirl pride about apologizing?"

Sylvia's eyes were tragic. "We're paying for what we've done. And you're paying the most."

"Never mind that; it's worth it," he said recklessly, "unless you leave. If you do, it's all a waste." He leaned over to her. "Tell me it's worth it, Sylvia."

Sitting across from him on opposite sides of the severe office table, as she had that early morning when he had first kissed her, she sent her mind, an obedient djinn, to summon back the memories which had burst into flower only from the moment when, emerging from Trumbull at dead of night, she had felt the warm incitement of the whispering rain on her face. Every step, every thought thereafter she recalled with a vividness which told her that she could never forget any of it while a woman's pulse throbbed in her veins. The physical memories were not the clearest etched. There her mind dimmed in the half-blind fog of passion, to emerge upon the clear remembrance of his face's cameo

beauty as they sat together in the upper room, of the play of his fancy, the swift flame of his thought lambent in terse and revealing phrase, the sense of his courage and directness and surgical frankness, his disregard of unproven traditions and conventions; of his eyes as they touched upon her hair, her lips, her hands, her own eyes while they two sought omens in the fire that whispered to the unquenched flame in their own hearts its imperishable and inviolate secrets.

"Yes; it's worth it."

He said passionately; "I've never believed in love except as an emotional masking of an eternal necessity. You made it something different; something finer and higher."

She said with sad clarity: "How can it be when it involves us in lies and surrenders?"

"You haven't lied," he denied jealously.

"But I shall when I apologize to Prof. Shenstone."

"Compromise," he returned but with no conviction in his voice. "Life has to be largely compromise."

"Yes; when one has started that way."

Compromise! Perhaps that was the word invisibly placarded on all side doors.

CHAPTER XIX

"PAGING Miss Clarke. Message for Miss Verity Clarke," intoned Starr from the inner room, hearing the Freshman enter Suite Twenty. "Letter for Miss Clarke. Look on the mantel."

Verity opened the envelope and gave a choked yelp which brought out her roommate.

"Did it bite you?" She stared at the floor whither the contents had fluttered from the recipient's flaccid fingers. "What's that?" she demanded. And, as the Freshman only giggled helplessly: "*Will* you tell me what that is?"

"It's—it's the p-p-p-price of my shame," gurgled Verity.

"Oh, it is, is it?" Starr picked up the five hundred dollar bill, crisp as only a heavily denominational green-back can be. "I'll say you got a fair price."

"As per invoice," said Verity, whose Domestic Economy course included business terms. She examined the envelope. "There's no stamp. How did it get here?"

"Gwen brought it."

"*Gwen!* Oh, of course." She took the bill, began to stare at it hypnotically and fell into self-contained ruminations, which is one of the most infuriating methods of handling a mystery. "I'd forgotten all— No, I hadn't really forgotten, but—" Her voice sank to a

mumble from which occasional and useless words such as "he," "I," "never," and "if" projected.

"Do you want a nice hard sock in the ribs with a hockey stick?" inquired her roommate after patience had ceased to be a virtue.

"I meant to tell you about it when I got back and then—well, it seemed nicer," said the other naïvely, "to kind of have it all to myself. Ouch! I'm trying to tell you, aren't I? Put that thing back."

She gave a sketchy outline of the night on the island, Starr listening with devout interest.

"Haven't you heard from him since?"

"Not a word."

"You didn't let him know who you were?"

"No."

"Why-ever not?"

"I—I liked it just as it was; a one-performance sort of thing. And I thought he'd most likely forgotten—

"Liar."

"Of course I hoped he wouldn't and at the same time I wasn't going to make any move to see him because I liked him quite a lot and didn't see any use in liking him any more."

"That's a putrid reason!"

"No; it isn't." Verity's soft lips set in the line of obstinacy. "I know you and Syl think I'm an idiot and sappy and all that, but I don't care; I'm not going to get excited over any other man till I've met up with my Pullman Seven. I know I'm going to meet him."

"He's probably a hundred and seventeen years old."

"He *is* not. You know, for a minute I had the wild hope that my boatman was the one. Something in his

voice or manner or something." She sighed. "But he wasn't."

"How are you going to get the money back to him?"

"I'm not."

"You're going to *keep* it?"

"I'm going to give it to Syl to lend to Sara La Lond. It'll get her through till she pinches the Alumnæ prize."

"Hottentot baby! What'll the donor think?"

"He hasn't got a think coming. He committed himself to the proposition of just yearning to help any worthy girl through college. Is Sara worthy? I ask you."

"Ask *her* and get a thick ear. Why, even Esther Reynolds wouldn't stand being called worthy. Are you going to tell your noble islander?"

"I'm going to consult Gwen."

Consultation with Miss Peters promised little at the outset. "Don't know a thing about it," she replied to Verity's cautious questions, "except that Harvey mailed me a registered letter enclosing a sealed envelope for you. Receipt, please. Sign in the space marked X. Thanks for the dime."

"Haven't you seen him since?" inquired the visitor, disappointed.

"Since when?"

"Since I did."

"That depends. I expect so, unless you've been meeting up with him recently. I saw him last week."

"Did he say anything?"

"Did he strike you as a deaf mute?" retorted the other. She scrutinized the unsuppressed interest of

Verity's flushed face. "What's on? Has little Cold-heart got warmed up all of a sudden? Yes; he did say an earful—if you don't care what you get in your ear. He asked if I knew you and when I said yes he cut in and said that was all he wanted to know; that if there was anything further you could furnish it yourself. He's a queer bird, Harvey."

Fair play with a friend was in the very marrow of Verity's bones. She looked Gwen in the eye. "Gwen, do you want him?"

"Do I *want* him? Who; Harvey Westfall?"

"Yes."

"Why, he's my uncle! A real one."

"Your *uncle*? H-h-h-how old is he?"

"Thirty, I guess. Or maybe twenty-nine. You needn't look so sore about it. It isn't illegal to have an uncle of thirty."

"It's unusual," said Verity severely.

"Nobody can say it's my fault. Anyway he's a duck. Look here, do *you* want him?"

"Certainly not," retorted Verity with dignity.

"Then why all the uproar?"

"Just ordinary interest in a friend's affairs," was the airy response. "'voir."

What Gwen had not imparted to her visitor was Harvey Westfall's declaration; "That girl is a danger signal for any man with two eyes and if she ever flashes a wigwag to me I'll come out of the forest with a leap. But it's her move."

Verity departed from the interview with a feeling of dissatisfaction amounting to restlessness. Beneath her virginal aloofness of bearing, she concealed a warm

romanticism, just as Sylvia's matter-of-fact and inbred puritanism was tempered by potentialities of passionate abandonment, and Starr's lawlessness by a saving leaven of self-preservative caution. "Woman," as the sage and sainted Althea Sperry once wrote in a privately preserved letter, "is not made all out of one piece of calico."

Starr and Sylvia held conclave over their roommate. "The kid has waked up; there's no doubt of that," said the former.

"She's a blazing beauty; that's what she is. Nixie was right; a girl has got to know she's pretty before she can put herself over on the Great World of Men."

"Yes; but how to remove the Pullman complex?"

"Do you really think that's on her mind or is it only a bluff?"

"No; she's made a fetish of it. You know what an obstinate brat she is. Look at that chin."

"I think," pronounced Sylvia, "that a major operation is indicated and that this Westfall male is maybe the chosen instrument."

"Wish we had a chance to size him up."

"Why not get Gwen to have him down for the spring play?"

"Potent thought. But she says he hates fussy functions."

"Then give him a dark tip that he'll learn something to his advantage by coming."

"I positively *revere* your originality of thought and expression," said Starr and expertly dodged a bed-slipper. "We can sound Gwen, anyway."

"Shall we tell Vee?"

"No. Let her wait and see for herself. Shock might be useful in reducing the Pullman yen."

Gwen at once fell in with their plan and after a considerable effort of strategy contrived to extract a half promise from the woodsman without revealing the plot. Sylvia, who was on probation with all privileges cut off as a result of the debate with Miss Shenstone, was put in general charge of the campaign as having time on her hands, since all extra-campus activities were prohibited to her. (Much she cared. She was meeting Patterson Gifford two and three times a week in reckless disregard of almost certain discovery, sooner or later, though Ida McKay had abandoned the chase, having achieved her end.) Gwen made only one stipulation.

"I won't stand for his being used as an anise-seed bag. He's a good nunky if he is mine own."

"He's got to take his chances, hasn't he, like any one else?"

"Oh, he can take care of himself. Just so long as the cards aren't stacked against him."

"He's up against Gallant Gale and a fond but fleeting memory. Do you want a handicap for him?"

"Oh, go to hell," said Gwen amiably. "How much shall I tell him?"

"Tell him nothing. We want a chance to give him the once-over, though, before operations begin."

Opportunity was arranged in the form of a small and intimate tea to which Miss Verity Clarke was not invited. The two H.B.V.'s at once and emphatically liked Harvey Westfall; his lean, long-jawed Yankee looks, his imperturbable self-possession, his air of good-humored competence, his refreshing abstinence from the

prevalent mode of incessant wise-cracking and double entendre; even the slouchy ease of his well-made clothes. They secret-signaled each other "He'll do" and set themselves with all their art to making friends, which is quite a different and rarer technic than that of fussing. They won.

"A pair of corkers," was his verdict to Gwen, delivered with an enthusiasm not common with him.

"They're our best line of goods. Which one d'you think you'd fall for?"

"Neither. They're grand. But they're not my trouble."

Next noon on the campus he encountered Miss Trouble, incarnate. There was a rush of feet behind him, a breathless, excited call and he turned to meet the eyes of Verity Clarke, widened in lovely and welcoming surprise.

"Why, it's my gay gondolier. Aren't you going to shake hands?"

"I think I might safely go that far," said he gravely.

"And say you're glad to see me?"

"It is," returned Mr. Westfall primly, "an unexpected pleasure."

"Did you come to look after the investment?"

"What investment?"

"Well—me."

"No."

"Don't be a grumptious gondolier. Anyway," she added softly, "it was sweet of you and I'll tell you all about it some day. Are you coming to the show to-night to see your little friend, the third-rate trouper, do her stuff?"

"Yes."

"Then maybe that's what you came for."

"No."

"Well, for a line of sprightly conversation!" said Miss Clarke indignantly. "Do they have to get you on an island to make you loosen up?"

"When am I going to see you alone?"

"Oh, that's different. One doesn't get much chance at these campus galas. Why didn't Gwen let me know you were here?"

"Didn't she?"

"Certainly not."

"Neither did she let me know you were here."

"There's some deep plotting going on," twinkled Verity. "I've got a class. See you again."

The forester walked downtown with a purposeful stride. On the way he was sighted by the two H.B.V's. "He has all the symptoms," pronounced the man-wise Starr, "of a swain on his way to a flower emporium."

In that moment there was born to the mind of Sylvia Hartnett the Scheme Magnificent. She seized her companion's arm. "Starr, I've got an idea."

"Unpinch me. And rid yourself of it."

"A slinky idea! The slinkiest idea of this or any other semester, year, century, or epoch."

"Cease hating yourself and tell me."

"It all depends on whether you're right about the floral quest."

They followed Westfall until he disappeared within the door of "Ye Bouverie," whereafter Sylvia spoke tensely for two minutes while her companion listened and questioned and finally gave excited approval. At

the conclusion they entered and surprised Mr. Westfall supervising the selection of the four dozen niftiest roses in the place. Him they hailed, friendly wise, as Uncle.

"It's too divine of you," gushed Sylvia, "to be sending us those lovely posies."

"Don't say they aren't for us," besought Starr.

The Westfall goat was not an easily attainable animal. It's proprietor grinned. "Well, not this lot, exactly; but the next or Class B assortment which I am now about to select with your kind assistance."

"You are a good sport, Harvey-Uncle," admired Sylvia, "and just for that you get off free. Particularly as we'll possibly get a whiff of this bunch in Suite Twenty. Is that a rotten guess, I ask you?"

"Not so far gone in decomposition as to be unrecognizable," he admitted.

"Then heed. Before that box gets its final wreath of smilax, look us over. Carefully."

"I see nothing to criticize," was the cautious response.

"Do we appear reliable?"

"To outward view."

"Would you trust your life, your bank account, your secret hopes and ambitions and your untainted honor in our keeping?"

"Oh, in a minute!"

"Don't be jaunty about it. This is fateful stuff. Will you or will you not put in with the flowers a small parcel which we will furnish you? It's for your own good," she added piously.

"Then God help me! I'll do it. . . . Hey! Where are you escaping to?"

"To get the dynamite. Wait here."

They delivered to him four minutes later a neatly wrapped package of inconsiderable size and weight which he hefted instinctively before dropping it into the box. He then picked it out again and attached his card to it, a process which gave the two girls lively delight.

"Aren't you going to ask any questions?" queried Starr.

"No."

"You win *all* the ribbons. I'm positively intimidated by such composure."

"I'm in the hands of my friends," said Harvey Westfall, attempting without too brilliant success, a docile expression. "Any instructions?"

"N-no. Your own brains have got to see you through the perilous crisis. We can't tell you anything without violating a confidence." This from Sylvia.

"That's too unfair," protested Starr. "He's entitled to a start, at least. Uncle-of-our-hearts, the danger point is Number Seven. If Vee says anything about that—and she will—you say 'Yes' and do the best follow up you——"

"She has, already."

"She *has*?" "When?" "How?" "What did she say?" "What did you say when she said it?"

"I said that I had a seven-toed cat. I think seven toes on a cat is pretty good, myself, but she seemed disappointed."

"Oh, you poor drip!" mourned Starr.

"Well, it's bad but it might be worse," amended Sylvia. "I'll give you one more pointer. If things get too thick your cue is to say, 'There's a time for all things,' and look owlish. And may your brains save your life for we won't be there to help. I'm betting on you, Unky."

"Also me," confirmed Starr.

"Well, if I never see you again, remember I died with my boots on," said he gallantly.

That evening Miss Verity got the second great shock of her young life when she opened the box of roses and found among them, attached to the card of Mr. Harvey Westfall, a small package containing two spoons cupped together and bound with a length of ribbon. It startled her too much even for a yelp.

The other two, entering with airy casualness, perfectly timed, found her gazing frozenly upon the portent.

CHAPTER XX

VERITY'S performance in the play was a near-flop. Never had she acted so badly. Out in front Gallant Gale, looking somewhat seedy for him, and his faithful satellite, Loyster, did their best for her, but soon the support of her friends died down to the merely perfunctory plaudits that mark a failure. She did not even care. Her mind was otherwise occupied. After the final curtain she slipped away and sought refuge in bed.

There Starr, severe of countenance, found and arraigned her. "You're a swell hard-boiled virgin, I don't think."

"Lemme alone." Verity buried her face petulantly into her pillow.

"I suppose you're going to let him chase you off the campus."

"Was he out front?"

"Of course he was. And he came back, looking for you."

"Maybe I'll see him to-morrow," quavered the freshman.

"Why, you poor sheep! Wait till Sylvia sees you. You'll get an earful."

"Where is Syl?"

"She isn't in yet." Involuntarily Starr looked at her watch.

"Starr, I know all about Syl."

"What do you know?"

"Everybody's talking. Isn't it awfully dangerous?"

"Of course it is."

"Are they together now?" asked Vee in a low, shaken voice.

"I don't know where else she'd be."

"It must be wonderful to be in love that way—and terrible, too."

"They'll crash, sure as the world."

"Maybe they think it's worth it. Is it worth it, Starr?"

The older girl frowned. "I wish I knew. I didn't think it was or—" She left the conclusion in the air.

In the still upper room of the Gifford house, Sylvia slipped from the chair to the floor, curling her arm over her lover's knee. It was not yet midnight. She had left the play early and crossed the deserted campus unseen. Her voice was dreamy as she said:

"Sometimes I wonder how it all happened, Giff."

"Naturally enough." She knew, without looking up that he was smiling.

"Oh, yes! In a way. If any one had ever told me, though, that I'd have an affair with a Faculty. . . !"

"How comes it that you'd never had an affair before?"

She stirred uneasily. "D'you think that's so extraordinary?"

"In this adventurous age? A girl of your temperament?"

"But I haven't got temperament. Except for you."

"There's enough masculine vanity in me to make me love to hear you say it."

"Isn't it something more than vanity?"

His strong fingers swept lightly from her chin down along her throat. "You know it is."

"I'm glad it was you," she whispered with soft vehemence. "It couldn't have been any one else, I expect."

"How can you tell? You haven't experimented."

"But of course I have. Well, I mean I've tried necking and all that sort of thing, just like any one else."

"The scientific spirit."

"Don't be poisonous, Giff! I've never been a promiscuous petter."

"No? Why?"

She shook her bright head. "It makes me feel like a porcupine, all quilly. Until you kissed me. The first time you looked at me, that way—if you laugh at me I'll never forgive you, Giff—I knew that if you really wanted me I'd come to you. I couldn't help it." She nuzzled her cheek against his knee. "Not that I tried very hard. I didn't try at all. I just came. Am I a hardened character to talk so coolly about it?"

"You're the clearest and most straightforward spirit I've ever known."

She nestled to him. "Giff, let's not ever have any remorse or anything of that sort. Neither of us. No matter what happens. I want it all to be like this always—when we remember it, I mean."

"Don't talk of remembering," he whispered strongly. "I can't think of a life without you."

"But it can't go on forever."

"No. It can't go on forever."

"If we don't break it off ourselves, we'll be found out sooner or later. Won't we?"

"I suppose so. People generally are. I've never blinded myself to that."

"And then what?"

"There'll be hell to pay."

"You'll have to leave, won't you?"

"Yes."

"I can't bear to think of that. Is it worth it, Giff?"

"What do you expect me to say to that?"

She laughed, reaching up to enfold and draw down his head, sealing her warm lips to his. "I expect you to say, 'Yes,' of course."

"Yes."

"You're a satisfying sort of person, Giff. You make me feel always that you mean so much more than you say. Not that you say much!"

"I say what I most mean every time I speak to you or look at you."

"I know," she murmured sweetly. "I'm terribly in love with you, Giff, and I love being terribly in love with you. But I don't suppose I'd want to marry you, if you were free."

"Why not?" he demanded hotly.

With that sad, protective wisdom of women, so often miscalled intuition, which is the gift of the gods for the reading of men's souls and which outruns experience or knowledge, she said: "You'd hate any woman that

you had to live with. Yes; even me. You couldn't help it. While you're not bound to me you'll love me. That's all I want."

"It isn't all I want," he began but she thrust a hand up against his fiercely set lips and hushed them.

"Let's not talk about it. Let's not think of anything else except that we're together now."

The lights had been out for hours in Twenty when Sylvia Hartnett ran across the broad, dim lawn toward the rear of Trumbull, keeping prudently to the line of the shadowing trees. Her blood sang in her veins. Her lips were still soft with unforgotten kisses. She felt herself above fear, above harm or danger. The form of a tree trunk before her stirred and broadened into life. Sylvia stopped. A voice, cracked with surprise, said; "It's you. Don't be scared. It's me, Ralph; Ralph Loyster."

"Come over here," she directed coolly, drawing him into the shelter of a tall bush. "What's it all about?"

"It's you," he reiterated dully. "I was waiting for Vee Clarke."

"You mean that Vee had a date with *you?*" said the incredulous Sylvia.

"No. With Gale. Well, I don't know that—You haven't seen Sid Gale, have you?"

"Certainly not."

"Has Vee? Is she out with him?"

"Vee's in bed."

"How do you know? How do I know you're not lying to me?" he asked miserably. "You girls all stand together so. Lemme look at you."

He moved closer and she gave a quick exclamation. One cheek was puffy and discolored, his eye half closed, his chin blood-caked from a shallow cut.

"What's happened?"

"Fight," he said briefly.

"Here? On the campus?"

"No. Outside the hotel. Sid beat me up."

"What for?"

"He was half stewed and I tried to keep him from going out."

"Why?"

Loyster hesitated. The traditional loyalty of college boy to his fellow bound him. But his fiber was weakened by pain and anger and apprehension. "When he gets that way," he muttered, "there's nothing he won't do to—anyone. He's a devil. I was afraid he'd—get somebody—get himself," he amended, "into trouble."

"You think he had a date with Vee Clarke?"

"He did with somebody. I was afraid it was her. He's crazy about her." His voice trailed away. Sylvia felt an impulse of pity for the poor slob.

"You're pretty crazy about her, yourself, aren't you?" said she.

"Yes. But I'd have tried to stop him no matter who it was. You don't understand."

"No; I don't. But as far as Vee is concerned you needn't worry, m'lad. That wise freshman isn't taking any late-night chances with anybody, specially the Gallus One. She handed him the atmosphere long since."

"You wouldn't have any idea where he is?"

"Not me. Would it cool you off any if I find little Vee safe in bed and signal you?"

"Yes; it would," said the grateful Loyster.

"What'll you do then?"

"Look for him somewhere else."

"Whatever for? Do you crave another beating?"

"That doesn't matter. I don't care. I've got to find him."

Sylvia marveled. "Guardian of the public morals, eh-wot? If you're being watchman to Gallant Gale you must have your hands full. I don't get you. You're not drunk, are you?"

"No."

"Well, if you must continue your quest"—she paused, debated with herself, came to a decision—"try Nixie."

"You think she's still got sneakers for him?"

"Sure. He's the first man that ever turned her down. She'd give the ribbons off her shimmy to get him back. You'd better chase around there."

"Gimme the signal first. I gotta be sure about Vee."

She found the freshman sound asleep. Her flutter of a handkerchief from the window was answered and she saw the ungainly figure lope, with a painful hitch, along the roadway. Sylvia's memories, which she cherished to sleep, turned to dreams into which intruded the absurd and chivalrous Loyster, pitted in mortal combat against a venom-spitting monster with Gale's handsome face, in defense of a girl who was by turns Vee, Nixie, and herself.

The ground floor window of the Terhune cottage slid up softly. A graceful figure leapt out, then bent, limp, its forehead bowed on the high sill.

"Oh, God! God! God!" came from it in a whispered groan.

"Don't Sid, dear," Elsie Nichols's hand fluttered at his chin, striving to lift the bowed head. Her marvelous voice implored. "You mustn't. It's all right."

"You don't know," sobbed the boy.

"There's nothing to make a fuss about," she persisted. "You needn't blame yourself. I knew what I was doing." She laughed softly. "It had to happen some time. And I'm nearly twenty. And I wouldn't have had it happen first with anybody but you."

He lifted a face from which the drink had died out, leaving it racked and haggard. She kissed his lips. "Good-night, darling boy."

"I'm afraid to leave you alone."

"Silly! It's all right, I tell you."

The optimism of the spoiled darling came to his rescue. Maybe it was all right. Maybe his luck was with him and it would turn out that way; sometimes it did, he'd heard. Why worry until he knew? He kissed her lingeringly—that was part of his technique—turned and hurried lightfootedly away to face Ralph Loyster.

"I saw you."

"Saw me where?" Gale played for time.

"Getting out of her window. How long you been in there?"

"None of your business. Not long."

"You lie."

"Do you want another beating?" But there was no conviction in the threat.

"Did you tell her?"

"Mind your God-damned business," whimpered the Don Juan.

Loyster dug into his waistcoat pocket and brought out a key which he threw at the other.

"What's that?" demanded Gale querelously.

"That's the hotel key. I'm going back home."

Gale, the gallant, collapsed. "Don't leave me flat," he implored. "I'm afraid to be left alone, I didn't mean—After I lapped that last drink everything went queer. You know how I am when I get that way." His voice took on an accusing, exculpating whine. "Why didn't you stop me? You knew I was pickled. You ought to have—

"You filthy pup!" said Loyster. He limped away.

Gale stared after him, then contrived a laugh. To hell with Ralph! Sore. Jealous. No girl'd ever fall for him. Well, he'd come around in time. If he didn't, let him grouch and be God-damned! . . . Oh, if he could only get a drink; just one. Then maybe he could think this thing out clearly. What to do about Nixie! Why hadn't he had the guts to—to—well, he'd meant to. He insisted to himself that he'd meant to. Until she kissed him and then he forgot everything. It was her fault as much as his. If a girl wanted to take chances. She admitted herself, that it was her fault. He'd phone her; or write her, no, that'd certainly be too late. Well, he'd go to see her in the morning, when

his head was clear and tell her the whole damned thing. God! how he wanted a drink!

Before dawn Gallant Gale in his newspaper famed car with the college colors, was on his way back at seventy miles an hour, which was yet too slow to out-distance the pursuing furies of his fears,

CHAPTER XXI

VERITY woke up possessed valuably of a feeling of righteous indignation against Harvey Westfall. It gave her a confidence, a moral advantage for the impending encounter. Her boatman, she decided, was far from all that he should be. He had proved himself simply dumb, and stupidity is the unpardonable among the seven cardinal sins of modern youth. So when he cornered her at one of the teas she gave him a coolly friendly greeting and said:

"Account for yourself. What brings you here?"

"Haven't you heard about the big match?"

"At coll? No. What is it?"

"Our chess team—Princeton, you know—is playing yours."

She should have been on guard, but she fell for his perfect gravity of demeanor. "But you're not in college now," she objected, "and I'd never have taken you for a chess player."

"I'm cheer-leader for the team."

"Reptile!" But Vee chuckled. "I suppose you really came up to see Gwen."

"I've seen Gwen before. Often. That was an extraordinary performance you gave last night."

"I thought I was rotten."

"That's what I meant." (Well, *what* were you to do with a man like that!)

"Is that what the roses meant? Condolences? Did I thank you for them?"

"Not that I recall."

"I loved 'em. And the other reminder. That was a shock."

So the battle was joined. Harvey felt like a boxer pitted, blindfold, against an opponent who fought in the light of day. He must guide himself by such clues as he could wangle her into giving him.

"If it's a shock don't you think you could withstand it better in the open air?"

"We might walk," she conceded, and they took their leave. "Now," said she, "are you going to explain?"

Her former word, "reminder," had given him something to go on. "It was intended to stir up a stagnant memory," he ventured.

"Stagnant, yourself!" she retorted. "You've got your nerve. You're the one that forgot."

"Never for a minute," he denied with a fervor gallantly undiminished by his lacking the faintest idea of what he had never forgotten.

"Then why did you flatten out so when I gave you the opening about Lower Seven?"

Lower Seven! Here was a clue, indeed. It might also be a crisis. Caution was plainly indicated. Sylvia's phrase for use in time of peril came to his lips. "There's a time for everything," he stated oracularly.

It served at least one useful purpose; it took her aback. She studied him with a dubious regard while his mind quested wildly for meanings. Lower Seven could indicate only one thing, a journey. A night

journey. On a sleeper. There they were supposed to have encountered each other. But what kind of an encounter? Why hadn't she at once recognized him and he her? Had he (that is to say, whoever it was whose part he was playing) rescued her in an accident when darkness and confusion rendered recognition uncertain? Romantic but the best he could do at such short notice. Pretty good, in fact; he wouldn't be a bit surprised if he'd hit it first crack. Sherlock Holmes was becoming very pleased with himself as a deducer when the bomb hit him.

"Why didn't you speak to me the next morning?"

Well, why hadn't he? Mr. Westfall's harassed cerebral convolutions did some rapid whirling, but to no immediate good purpose. ("There's a time for everything" didn't seem to fit this situation at all.)

"Why didn't I speak to you," he repeated slowly and consideringly.

"Yes. Why didn't you?"

"I got off." (If that's too raw—he thought—I can always climb a tree and yell for help.)

"At Buffalo? I thought you probably had." (Saved!)

"Of course I hated to," he continued impressively. "But duty called."

"Noble-hearted youth! But you did leave the spoons for me. That *was* snappy."

Spoons? Snappy? It sounded to the groping mind of Harvey Westfall like pure insanity. In the name of St. Pullman what had spoons to do with this bewildering and excited child? And why should he leave

them for her? Was it the booty of a shared robbery? He had to say something. "Oh, do you think so?" murmured deprecatingly seemed reasonably safe.

"When I sat down in the diner (The scene's shifted—thought Westfall. Hope it isn't going to be any mixed) and the waiter put them down, I nearly passed peacefully away. How could you tell him who to give 'em to? S'pose they'd gone to the wrong person?"

With desperate inspiration he replied: "That was easy. I told him to spot the prettiest girl in the car and give 'em to her. Some of these waiters are very intelligent."

"How could you tell I was pretty?" she challenged. "I don't believe I was up when you got off in the morning. You certainly hadn't seen me—well, before. (But why the blush?) You only heard me; and that was mostly gasp. (Now what in the name of Mysterious Mike did that mean?) And if you did see me, why didn't you remember me when we met at Risley?"

(Oh Lord! What was the answer to that one? "There's a time for—" No; no!) He countered with "Why didn't you remember me, if it comes to that?"

"What did I have to go on? Only your voice, and just a couple of stingy whispers, at that. No, I don't mean that! That was horrid of me," and she gave him a look so warm that his heart wiggled in its socket. "Anyway, I did hope—I mean, suspect it was you. But you were such a dumb bunny about it."

Here was his opening again. "There's a time for everything."

"You said that before. But isn't it the most marvelous coincidence that ever was! I had the feeling that we were going to meet again, and in the open, but I never thought it would be that way. You're rather like what I expected you to be," she concluded shyly.

"I'm always like that," he confided.

"You win the tin violet for the shrinking championship. There's one thing I insist on knowing, though."

"Sure it isn't something that no lady ought to know?" (Pretty good, that! he congratulated himself.)

"If so, dunt esk."

"I will, too. You haven't told me how you picked me for the spoons."

Having won breathing space he had utilized the opportunity for a splendid invention. "I heard a couple of undergraduate sheiks raving about you in the diner early that morning."

"Did they say it was the girl in Lower Six?" (That was a help!)

"Yes."

"But there were two of us. It might have been Myrtle."

"I had to take some chance. And there was a feeling about you"—He paused, amazed and entranced by the warm and sweet color that came flooding up her face at this innocently meant expression—"I mean, I had an idea from the general effect that you were the original and refreshing balm to the eye, and all that. . . . Is that a lake that I see before me?"

"You crash an A in geography."

"Boats on it?"

"Even so. Which reminds me. I never paid you for the other trip. How much?"

"Fifty cents an hour is the regular rate. Four hours, I reckon it," was the business-like return.

"That's two dollars. Not including the swim. I can't bear yet to think of your taking that risk. How could you do it?"

"You spurned my humble hospitality and insisted on going home," he pointed out, "and that was the only way I could think of. We strive to please."

"I haven't got two dollars with me. Suppose I row you around our lake for an hour on account."

"It's a deal."

"Though we haven't got an island here. How's your nice, kind island?"

"It's feeling lonely."

"It'll feel better when you get back to it."

"I don't believe it'll ever be itself again until you come back."

"Haven't been asked."

"You weren't asked the first time."

"Does the island want me to come back?"

"More than it's ever wanted anything."

She met his look and her eyes slid away from it across the sunny ripples. "I don't want your island to be too lonely. It was good to me."

"The world is generally good to you, isn't it, little Vee?"

"I suppose it is. I don't know that I've thought much about it. You were good to me—awfully good."

"At fifty cents an hour, unpaid."

"I wasn't thinking of the island then. The other—er—occasion, that you've forgotten."

"Let's forget it again," he begged hastily. "Tell me about the rest of the show trip. What a half-wit you must have thought me, taking you for a trouper."

They drifted about for an hour when the lowering sun apprised the reluctant girl that she must get back. The landing was deserted when they reached it. (Verity thought as he stretched out his hand to help her—Now if I hold his hand one-half of one per cent of a second after I get on the float, he's going to kiss me. And I don't want to be kissed—yet. . . . Don't I? Maybe I do, and it's only that I'm afraid. And why should I be afraid of him? I've been kissed before and it never made me feel afraid. It never made me feel anything. But I think he could. I know he could. P'raps that's why I'm afraid.) She came out of the boat in an easy spring and stood facing him with mischief in her eye.

"When do you want your five hundred dollars back?"

"Who told you that I wanted it back? Am I not to be allowed to boost the cause of higher education?"

"Sir! How dare you! I'm a very proper young person even if I do make midnight trips to islands and I don't take five hundred dollars from any gent except as a loan."

"At six per cent interest, I suppose."

"If you want to grind the faces of the poor," she said as they walked up the path. "It's being put to very good use, I can tell you."

"All right by me. Play it on the ponies, if you like and have a good tip."

At the door of Trumbull the quirky light came back into Vee's soft eyes. "Boatman," said she, "regard me the college clock."

"Six thirty," he read. "What of it? They can't put you in jail for that."

"Keep on regarding it. I like your profile. . . . You've got to admit, Harvey Westfall, late of Lower Seven, that to occupy the same berth with a man and have him not even recognize you at the next meeting is—well, just a touch enervating."

His head came around with a jerk. His face, suddenly white and strained under its tan, startled her as much as the tenseness of his voice. "What's that?"

"If you can't stand a little teasing—" she began resentfully.

By an effort of will and brain, Harvey commanded his mental processes. He was no Victorian in his ideas, but he was just old enough to retain certain prejudices regarding the chastity of women which a generation a trifle younger pretended to disdain. The threat of disillusionment—and such a disillusionment!—in her lightly taunting words had brought to him as nothing else could have done the realization that he was hopelessly in love with this incomprehensible child. He said quietly; "Of course. And, that being the case, can you wonder at my disappointment when you wouldn't stay on my island?" But as he laid his trap he was ashamed of even that momentary failing of his faith. If those eyes and that mouth did not mean innocence, then he never again would trust the deceiving face of woman.

She said, with a wide look; "But that would have been different."

With genuine inspiration this time he suggested; "As different as accident from design."

She nodded, and disappeared. Westfall's long woodsman's stride carried him happily across the campus and past Starr and Sylvia without even the tribute of a pause. Indignant, they pursued him.

"Stop and deliver. What luck?"

"We've had a very interesting conversation."

"Gods! How I hate a demure man," cried Sylvia. "What did you find out, if any?"

"How much do you two know?" he countered.

"Everything."

"Then I'll tell you my theory. Vee and I seem to have bunked together in a sleeper and left each other in the morning—No? Well, anyway, left each other as we were when we met, to spare your blushes. The dark, I take it, prevented any certain recognition."

"The lad," said Starr "is clewaw."

"But who was the profound sleeper in Lower Seven?"

"Nobody knows."

"And, for the love of learning, what have the cock-eyed spoons got to do with? . . . Laugh, darn you, laugh. I'll tell the highly radiated air one thing. That original Lower Seven guy is going to have a conflict on his hands when he does turn up. And he'd better be pretty soon about it or he'll be too late. No lady can sleep with me and not make an honest man of me!"

The two girls looked at each other, and raised each a hand. "Go to it, with the blessing of the H.B.V's."

"What does that mean?"

"Ask Vee."

He saw Vee only once more before he had to leave. She seemed a bit shy though she did kiss him good-by (hardly more than sister-fashion) when he left.

CHAPTER XXII

GWEN PETERS lounged into Suite Twenty and made salaam. "Peace upon all this household," she intoned.

"And to you be peace, daughter of Allah! What's the dirt?" Starr looked up from a waist upon which she was operating with a particularly malodorous cleansing fluid.

Gwen, who was by way of being a clearing house for all the news that never reaches the college authorities, sat down and asked: "What's the matter with La Lond?"

"Nothing's the matter with her that I know of."

"Does she cop the Alumnæ or doesn't she?"

"By a mile. Any one think different?"

"Yes; they do."

"Why, who else has got a Chinawoman's chance?" demanded Sylvia, tossing her book into a corner.

"Ah; now you're asking. All I know is that Sally Messmore and a couple of other wise ones over in The Bulrushes are betting against her."

There was a circle in the Sarah B. Moses Dormitory (known, by the inevitable logic of college slang, as The Bulrushes) who esteemed themselves hot sports and made book on all college events.

"That stringy little ferret! Who cares what she does?" But Sylvia's expression was less unconcerned than her words.

"She buys her clothes out of her bridge winnings. You don't catch her betting unless she's got something to go on. They say she's got a couple of hundred on the field against La Lond."

"That so? I think I'll stroll over and have a talk with Ratty Messmore."

"You might get something," allowed the caller. "And then again you mightn't. She's nobody's pet moron."

The girl thus complimented was sitting on her window sill studying out a bridge problem when the emissary from Trumbull hailed her. Miss Messmore of the senior class had a small, hard, alert, cheerful face and a slim figure always snappily arrayed. She answered the call;

"Come up and set." Then, as Sylvia appeared in the door; "Have a Cemetery Special? The cork-tips are on the trunk."

"I hear you're betting against La Lond for the Alumnæ."

"Got a couple down," was the careless response. "Handling any Trumbull money on it?"

"No. But I'd like to know why you're betting against her."

"Because I think she'll lose."

Sylvia smoked ruminatively—one of her own cigarettes. "Who's going to win?"

"Ah, I didn't say who'd win. I'm betting La Lond loses."

"And you're not telling why?"

Miss Messmore directed a thoughtful look at her visitor. "Did she send you here?"

"No." Sylvia's nostrils quivered. Her teeth bit off the monosyllable, symptoms which were not lost upon the acute Miss Messmore.

"Ever push a girl out of a third-story window and see what happened?" she inquired with a grin. "If not, don't experiment on me."

"All right, suh-weetie!" (Meaning—That's what I'd like to do, but I'll wait and see what's next.)

"Get me on this. It's a straight business proposition with me. I've nothing against La Lond personally." She took three puffs and that kind of deep inhalation vulgarly known in Sperry as a toe-nail-tickler. "Except a hundred and fifty dollars."

"Would you take more?"

"I could place it, I guess."

"You appear to be pretty sure, Messmore."

"Instead of taking your easy money I'll give you a tip for yourself and La Lond. Your entry had better withdraw quietly and quick."

"Don't make my blood run cold," begged the visitor.

"All right. But I've seen the letters."

"What letters?"

"Oh, cut the bluff," invited Miss Messmore wearily. "You're her side-kick; you ought to know what letters. Maybe you don't know, either, that she's got an amant."

"Don't be sil-lay," besought Sylvia languidly.

Sally Messmore eyed her steadily. "All right. I've played poker, myself. If the Faculty or the Self Guv ever sees those precious documents—and you don't have to read between the lines to get what's in 'em—La Lond will lose more than the Alumnæ and Sperry will lose the honor of La Lond's presence."

"That's your little game is it?" said the caller thoughtfully.

The other became suddenly and volubly defensive. "You needn't think I'm doing it. I haven't got the letters; don't even know where they came from. Didn't have a thing to do with it and I'm not going to have. I'm no blackmailer. But as long as I'm in on the knowledge, why shouldn't I make my bets accordingly? At that, I don't want to see any girl get in wrong and I'll go this far with you; if she quietly drops out, on account of her health or something, I'll see if it can't be fixed. What say?"

Sylvia said nothing. She rose, went to the dresser, took therefrom a whiskbroom and retired to a spot just outside the doorway. There she brushed herself from head to foot with the elaborate particularity of one who suspects an infestation of vermin. Insult in dumb show could go no further. But the effect was sadly weakened by her slamming the whisk violently to the floor as her parting gesture.

"I'll give you a week," the unabashed sport called after her.

Stratagems and plots were not natural to the straightforward Sylvia. Her first impulse was to take counsel with the other H.B.V's, but she abandoned it. This was a matter too intimately touching Sara to be discussed with any one. Should she warn the threatened girl? To what purpose? It could do no good, and would only distract her mind from her work in these last important weeks when she should be consolidating her advantage. But at least, she must be put on her

guard as to any further risks. Sylvia interrupted her friend at her late night studies.

"Seen Mark lately?"

The scholar looked up impatiently. "No."

"Expect to see him?"

"He wants me to come down. I can't afford the time."

"You're hearing from him, then."

"Of course. What's it all about, Hartnett?"

"Just that you can't afford to take any chances now."

"I'm not." Sara fell into one of her moods of analysis. "We're funny creatures, we women. There are stretches when I hardly think about Mark at all, except to be fond of him when a letter calls him to mind and to wish I didn't have to answer it. I don't answer half of 'em. Then again I'll suddenly be wild to see him and be with him and want to take the next train to New York and have him tell me that I'm beautiful and adorable—and believe it." She laughed. "At that, he isn't as important as the Alumnæ. Aren't I the cold-hearted lizard!"

"Is that what you call it? Well, I just wanted to tell you; if you can't be good, be careful."

"I can be both until exams are over."

"That's all right, then."

But it was far from all right. Sylvia, taking the problem for a walk, could see no way out. Not until she was emerging from a troubled dream that night did the great, the grand, the bitterly luminous idea come to her. As a side issue to it with a promise of malicious

and vengeful satisfaction, she proposed a plan to her roommates in the morning.

"Got any sporting blood, you two?"

"What's up?" inquired Starr. Verity simply waited.

"Possessed of any spare cash?" was the next query.

"That's different."

"No; it's the same. Golden opportunity, wenches! Never knocks twice at the same door. How much could you raise at a pinch, Starr?"

"I've got a hundred and twenty-five that isn't going to stir out of the old sock till it sees the gown it wants for Commencement."

"Bet it does. And you, Vee?"

"I've still got two hundred of the price of shame."

"Well, we can use it. I'll dig up a hundred and we'll bet Ratty Messmore and her pals stiff on Sara."

"But Gwen thinks they've got something."

"And so do they. But I know different. We can clean up four or five hundred."

"I'd be afraid," said Vee. "If it was my own money——"

"Did I ever give you a wrong steer, Freshman?"

"No; but——"

"*Lend* me the two hundred, then. I'm going to put my chemise on Sara."

"Oh, well; if you feel that way about it."

Together they made up a purse that staggered the sports of Sarah B. Moses dorm, but when the taunt went forth that Trumbull was ready to back them off the boards, they covered the money. Sally Messmore's tip was being quietly circulated.

Just after the week's grace allowed by the Messmore was up, Sylvia was summoned by Sara. "Syl, the J. B. has sent for me."

"Know what it's for?"

"No. General summons. I expect it's the letters. What else could it be?" said the scholar despairingly.

"When's the hearing?"

"To-night."

"Stand pat. I'm going to see Prudence Chase."

"What can you do? I might as well pack up my things and get out."

"Don't be an ass! Keep your mouth shut. I'm in charge of this show."

As head of the Self-Government, Prudence Chase, so Sylvia reasoned, would have all the evidence in the case. She went to the senior's study, and made a frontal attack, the best method with the straight-dealing Prudence.

"Has some one been making cracks about Sara La Lond, Chase?"

"What do you mean by cracks?"

"Complaints, then. Sneak-stuff. To the Self-Guv."

"If they had, I couldn't tell you. You ought to know that."

"Sure! I know. The sacred secrecy of the Self Guv and all that hooey." Sylvia was always flippant on the subject. "But I've got reason to think that somebody is trying to do Sara dirt."

"What is your reason?"

"We won't get anywhere this way," decided Sylvia, "as long as we both want to ask questions and neither wants to answer. Here's one more, before I begin to

tell you things. Haven't you had an anonymous letter about La Lond within a couple of days?"

Prudence's firm lips were silent; her eyes steady and uncompromising upon her interlocutor.

"Enclosing parts of two other letters?"

Still no reply from the student official. Sylvia was beginning to get angry.

"Oh, well! I know you have. One sheet of each. A typed one and one written in a man's hand. That ought to tell you I know what I'm talking about—since your high and lofty body is going to deal in secret and anonymous stuff and stolen letters."

At this Prudence flushed. "They were sent to me. I laid them before the J.B. as a hypothetical case, giving no names, and they unanimously decided to make an investigation."

"On an anonymous statement that it was La Lond?"

"There were confirming details. In the enclosed letters."

"Exactly. One was about the hitch-hike, wasn't it? And one about a date in New York. I'll even give you the date; the 24th."

"What does that prove?"

"It proves that I know enough to have a right to be heard."

"Are you telling me this officially?" Prudence was plainly troubled.

"Make it as official as you like."

"I don't like any of it."

"Maybe you'll like it less when I tell you that a betting crowd in The Bulrushes is engineering the whole thing."

"But if there is no truth in the charge what harm can it do to have La Lond up before the Board?"

"I'll tell you what harm it can do," asserted Sylvia heatedly. "It can stir her up so that she's liable to blow all to bits on her exams for the Alumnæ. You know how high-strung she is. How do you think she'll take it if you get her up there and say; 'We've got an anonymous letter saying that you stayed with a man in New York——'"

"The anonymous letter didn't say that."

"But that's what it amounts to, isn't it?"

Prudence hesitated before replying; "There is enough in the other two letters, the one written to her and the one written by her——"

"How do you know it was written by her? It's typed, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Well, is it signed?" (This was the crucial point; Sara had not been absolutely sure that she had not signed it. If she had, then Sylvia's plan was worthless.)

"No."

"And the other letter doesn't give any name?"

"No; it doesn't. But I'm afraid that it fits in too well with known facts. I never would have let the matter go this far if it hadn't."

"Let me see the letters, Chase."

"How can I do that?"

"There's every reason in the world. I can tell you the facts and save you from making a hell of a mess of the whole business. Haven't I told you enough already to show that I know what I'm talking about?"

"As a material witness I suppose you might be authorized to see them," concluded the official after reflection. "I'll take a chance." She unlocked an iron box, lifted out some papers neatly docketed, and handed two sheets to the other. One was in Mark Rainger's bold writing. A sentence stood forth to her sight:

"I have seen your eyes flame and forget under my kisses, and how shall I put you out of my heart now? You hold love too cheap in asking it."

Sylvia felt a little pang of sorrow for Mark; he was so much more in love with Sara than she with him. The typed sheet was more definitely damning, with its plans for a week-end stay in New York over the 24th and its warnings of caution.

She folded the letters and put them in her pocket. Her end was gained.

Prudence Chase stepped to the door and set her sturdy back against it.

"You will not get out of this room with those letters."

"Yes, I shall. And you'll let me."

"Try and see."

"They're my letters."

"*Yours!*"

"Certainly," was the cool return. "Where did you ever get the wild idea that they were Sara's?"

"All the confirming circumstances. I've checked up on them."

"Well—what?"

"The hike in the blizzard. Every one knows she was on that."

"So was I."

"And didn't get in till next morning."

"Neither did I."

"Three weeks later she was away over a week-end."

"Moi aussi." (Sylvia had been away over most week-ends until her interest in Patterson Gifford kept her on the campus.)

"Of course I wasn't checking up on you. But the week-end date in this letter matches with La Lond's green slip for the 24th."

"Look again. You'll find another green with Hartnett on it."

Prudence Chase studied her with a curious expression. "Sylvia Hartnett, I think you're not telling me the truth."

"What right have you to say that to me?"

"None at all." There followed a heavy silence. "Well, perhaps you are. Are you in love with the man?"

Instantly her lover leapt to Sylvia's mind. By even so much as the idle word she could not be unfaithful to her love for him. "Does one have to be in love," she retorted coolly, "to take a flyer?"

"And now I *know* you're lying."

"Is that official?" Sylvia shot back.

"None of this has been official, has it?"

"All of it as far as I'm concerned. And so is this." She snatched the incriminating sheets from her pocket, tore them to fragments, and thrust them out of the window where an obliging wind dispersed them beyond hope.

After an involuntary motion Prudence said, in a low

voice; "And where does that leave me? I've trusted you with the evidence and you've destroyed it."

"You don't need the evidence. I'm leaving coll."

"That's pretty stiff . . . I won't say I'm sorry, for I judge that you know what you're doing."

"Perfectly. I've got—other reasons for leaving, even if the letters hadn't been found. And after all I've got about as much out of Sperry as I ever could get."

The other said thoughtfully; "La Lond is a very fine scholar; the best we've had here in my time. But even at that——

"Leave La Lond out of it."

"Yes; that can be managed, too. If you're leaving college——

"I am. Just as soon as I can notify my parents."

"Then I can promise you that it will never get any further than a brief statement to the Board. Just enough to let La Lond out. And, by the way, if you've a fortnight to spare this summer why not run up to the island and put it in there?"

Sylvia flushed. No invitations in Sperry were so much prized as the rare ones to that almost fabulous river barony which had been in the Chase family through many proud generations. And this was more than an invitation; it was Prudence's way of testifying that she understood and admired. Sylvia would have loved to accept, when the intrusive thought of Giff checked the eager words. If Prudence knew of that! The Chase principles were legendary in Sperry where the mother had been succeeded by five daughters, all of them important figures in college life and important influences in college standards. No; not that front door

for Sylvia. Side doors! So she had chosen. She would play fair and pay the price.

"Thanks ever so. But I think I'll be in Europe."

"Some other time, then."

The successful emissary nodded and left.

"Dear—darling," (she wrote to Gifford that evening). Please don't blame me. You would have done it yourself. I couldn't let Sara be ditched. She counts for so much more than I do, and coll means so much more to her. And the best possible thing is for me to leave, now, before we are found out. You say, yourself, that we are bound to crash if we keep on—and we'd always keep on as long as we are here together. Your life is here. You've got your standards to live up to, and your religion of scholarship, and if I have been able to make that my religion, too, and do something for it by keeping Sara here, that makes me happy. I know it will be hard for both of us; terribly hard. But it had to come sooner or later and this is the best way. Please always remember that I'm not sorry, that I wouldn't have it any other way if I had these past weeks to live over again and that I always want for you everything good that life can give you. For I love you.

S.

P. S. Let's not try to see each other again. That would only make it harder.

CHAPTER XXIII

SOLEMN conclave of Suite Twenty had decided that there should be no moaning of farewell when Sylvia Hartnett put out to sea from the happy precincts, but such a party as should fittingly celebrate the past good times they had had together. Impromptu it had to be, for she had packed up and was leaving at once. She did not want to see Giff again. Not then, anyway; not on the campus. Perhaps later, somewhere somehow . . . ?

All the ruling class of Trumbull was at the party, but the spirit was lacking. Sylvia was going to leave a big hole in the community life. Moreover there was a feeling of restriction, of mystery; nobody really knew what it was all about for the girl had jealously guarded her secret lest some inkling of it get back to Sara La Lond who, as she well knew, would never have permitted the sacrifice. The last thing that Sylvia desired was the pale glory of the martyr. For public consumption it was given out that Miss Shenstone was the agency of her being "kicked." It was a damned outrage. Opinion upon this point was unanimous. It would have been equally unanimous no matter how well justified the penalty had been.

"Where's La Lond?" asked Gwen Peters after the party had got under rather languid way

"Working," Starr supplied the explanation.

"What's the good of her killing herself," said Helen Quiggs. "She'll cop, won't she?"

"Sure, she'll cop," said Pink Delavan, who had more money on the event than she could well afford to lose.

"Tell it to the Bulrushes." Celia Forsythe was skeptical.

"They're scared now. Messmore's closed her book."

"We've bet 'em to a standstill," remarked Starr.

"I hear she had a session with Prexy about gaming—what ho!" from Gwen Peters.

"Small loss *she'd* be," opined Roxy Ann Merrick, whereupon there fell a dismal hush, for the stressed word brought to them all the imminent loss of their companion.

To relieve the silence Golden Ruehl turned to Verity. "When do the Caravanners start their summer tour?"

"Two weeks after Commencement."

"Gallant Gale going?"

"He's dropped out, I hear."

"They say he's dropped out of a lot of things," said Roxy Ann. "Baseball and track. He sure isn't cutting the ice he used to."

"He certainly hasn't been so prevalent around here lately," observed Helen.

"Lost his taste for Sperry," suggested some one.

"Since Vee flattened him."

"Oh, he's off me. Nixie's his bet," said the freshman calmly.

"Nixie isn't going so strong, either, lately," put in Golden Ruehl.

"Wasn't there some kind of ruccus last time Gallant came down? I heard there was a scrap at the hotel."

"Don't know anything about it," answered Verity, as this seemed to be directed at her.

"He's sure the village cut-up when he's jingled."

"Nixie must be out after an A," said Celia. "She's spending most of her time in the Lab. Even evenings."

"That the reason she isn't here?"

"The reason she isn't here," pronounced Starr, "is the sound social reason that she wasn't asked."

"Yes, she was," contradicted Sylvia. "I asked her. She said she was feeling kinda rotten——"

"She always says that."

"——and she thought she'd try to work it off."

There was a knock at the door. "Verity Clarke there?"

"Yes."

"A gentlemanly voice desires your presence at the phone."

"What'll you bet it isn't Gallant Gale?" conjectured some one as the freshman left.

"Think he got our thought-waves and called up?" grinned Helen Quigg.

"He's been kinda in the air to-night," said Celia, who dabbled a bit in the mystic. "Look how we've been talking about him."

"Don't we always? He's the day's best topic of light conversation at Sperry."

Verity returned and slipped into her place trying to look unconscious of the fact that everybody was regarding her.

"Put us out of our misery," besought Roxy Ann. "Was it Gale?"

"Only the ice man," was the demure reply, "calling up for next winter's order."

"I'll bet that's warm ice," whispered Gwen to Sylvia. "Look at her eyes."

The gossip danced on. Presently Vee edged into her own room. When she emerged she had on a hat and a heavy coat. The roomful of girls exchanged glances but no words. Starr followed her into the hall.

"What's the idea, kid?"

"Motoring."

"Where?"

"Dunno."

"When'll you be back?"

"Same answer."

"Oh, *all* right!"

"Don't be sore, Twinklestar. It *is* all right. It's Lower Seven, the Prince of Pullman."

"*Who?* You mean the—" Starr bit her lip. She had nearly given herself away.

"Harvey, of course. Who else would I mean?"

"Of course. Dumb bunny me!"

Hurrying across campus by a main path, for it was not yet after hours, Vee vaguely felt herself pursued. A glance backward disabused her. Patterson Gifford's normal pace was swift enough to overtake any one, but that was obviously not his present purpose. He was merely taking one of his nocturnal tramps. He would pass her, unseeing, unnoting, unspeaking unless——

"Professor Gifford." She had not fully formulated what she wanted to say; the call had come to her lips instinctively.

He stopped short and peered at her. "Yes, Miss Clarke?" said he uncertainly.

"Yes. Oh, Giff—Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean—" She broke off, horrified at herself.

"It doesn't matter. Has anything happened?"

"Don't let her go," she begged incoherently. "You can stop her. Can't you? I know you can."

"Let who go where?" he said sharply. "What are you talking about?"

"Sylvia Hartnett."

"Where is she going?"

"She's leaving college. Didn't you know?"

"No. I've been away. I'll send for her to-morrow."

"To-morrow she'll be gone," said Vee desperately.

"On the early train?"

"Yes. The six-twenty."

"Thank you, child," he returned gravely, lifted his cap and went on.

For Vee it was as good as a promise. Half fearful, half glad over what she had done, she scurried along. At the corner of Blair a dim figure brushed past, turned and called after her excitedly. Impatient, Vee hardly checked.

"Who is it?"

"It's me, Ida," the figure answered in a shaking voice.

"It seems to me you're always in the wrong place," shot back the freshman severely as she resumed her course.

Ida waved a newspaper wildly in the air. "Wait! I've got something——" But the fugitive Verity was already beyond earshot of anything less than a screech.

Ida, balked but undiscouraged, sped toward Trum-

bull and up the stairs, her sure instinct guiding her to the spot where her sensation would have the most effect. For once in her deprecatory career she burst in upon a party (to which she had not been invited) without her preliminary knock and timorous announcement, and stood, chattering with excitement.

"What's on fire?" Gwen, who was seated near the door, held her up.

"Gallant Gale!" gasped the newcomer.

"Well, I always thought he was a hot bird, but I didn't suppose he'd go up in spontaneous combustion."

"*Don't!* He's dead."

The word dropped into an appalled stillness. Somebody said "Gee!" in a sibilant and incredulous exhalation.

"What did I tell you!" said Celia, triumphant, and began to snivel.

"Shot. This afternoon. In his room."

"Was it murder?" "Who did it?" "Who told you?" "When did you say—" "Are you *sure?*"

"It's all in the paper." Exulting in her success she unfolded the sheet with its spread of blackly sensational type. "I got it on the trolley."

The details, padded over three columns, were meager of fact but fairly definite. It was plainly a case of suicide. After getting his morning's mail, Gale had left the breakfast table and gone to his room. He was there only a short time, left the fraternity house, drove downtown in his car and tried, unsuccessfully it was said, to get some one on long distance. He cut all his morning classes, and there was some evidence that he had driven around the country for several hours,

returning after luncheon. At three o'clock he was found by a classmate sitting up in his armchair with a bullet through his head and the revolver beside him. There was no note but some papers had been burned in the fireplace.

Ida McKay shook herself out from beneath an over-arching billow of eager femininity. "Isn't it too ghastly!" she said gustfully. "Lemme have my paper, girls."

"Where are you going with it?" demanded Sylvia suspicious.

"Only to tell Nixie." Her eyes were brilliant and humid with the fierce lust of sensation-mongering.

Sylvia exchanged looks with Starr. "*You are* not," declared the latter.

"Why aren't I?" whimpered poor Ida. "It's my paper, isn't it?"

"Syl, you'd better go," said Starr. "You're nearer to this thing than any one else. Don't let her out, girls."

The miserable Ida was hemmed and herded in. Sylvia hesitated. She dreaded the ordeal of facing Nixie with her grim news, though perhaps Nixie knew it already. That would be only less bad. Well, somebody had to do it, and Sylvia Hartnett was no shirk.

"All right," she accepted.

Out of the darkness through which she hurried, thoughts flitted and hovered like bats; suspicions, theories, imaginings, vague and monstrous and insufficient. What had happened that night when Gallant Gale had beaten up the clumsy and chivalrous botcher,

Ralph Loyster? The obvious answer did not suffice to explain a tragedy so swift and final. Surely if it was *that* (and how could there be any certainty in the matter so soon?) some way out could have been found.

Elsie Nichols had been received back into college and was now rooming, alone, as always, in Cunningham Dorm. On her way, Sylvia stopped at the Lab but there was no light there, and in cutting across she tripped over a wired path and peppered one hand with painful gravel. The shock and physical smart steadied her. Where she had been half-hoping that Nixie would be out, it was now a relief to see a light in her room. She ran up the stairs and knocked. Nixie's voice, velvety even in the brusque monosyllable, said:

"Busy."

"It's Sylvia Hartnett. I want to speak to you."

The other opened the door and stood in it, grotesquely outlined in the hard light. She was haggard. There were bloodless circles beneath the glamorous eyes, and her face was haunted. But not by fear; it was something beyond fear. Later Sylvia knew it for what it was, a deadly disgust. But now she thought:

"She knows."

"Come in if you want to." The rich and gracious tones gave a false warmth to this grudging permission.

Entering, the visitor felt her feet clogged by clothing littered everywhere about the floor, surrounding a trunk which was riotously half-packed. All the photographs had been taken from the wall except one. Sidney Gale's face still smiled confidently, invincibly from above the mantel. The eyes seemed to flash into Sylvia's their familiar challenge of gayly expectant se-

duction, and then to grow dim. The room dimmed at the same time.

"What's the matter?" asked Nixie. She noted Sylvia's hand. "Hurt? Has there been a spill?"

"No. It's nothing. I'll—I'll just wash it off." If she could get cold water on her wrists and face she could go ahead. She turned from the blatantly smiling beauty of that face, so fearfully alive against the blankness of the denuded walls. Why had it alone been left there?

She cleansed her abraded palm, sloshed her face with water and reached toward the towel rack.

"Wait!" said her hostess sharply. "I'll get you a fresh towel."

"This one's all right."

"*Let it alone.*" Surprised at the vehemence of the command, Sylvia retracted her hand. Having dried her face with the substitute she found herself again, as it were, mesmerized into silence by the photograph.

"You don't seem pleased with my cutie," commented Nixie. "I left him out to burn him. The others go with me."

"Go? Where?" Sylvia felt stupefied.

"Haven't decided yet. I'm leaving college."

"Nixie! What for?"

"Well, if any one inquires of you, you might say that I've broken a rule."

"Rot! We all break rules."

"We don't all break this rule."

"Have you been called about it?"

"No; and I don't intend to be." Nixie's smile was bitter, uninterpretable, sardonic.

All through the quick dialogue Sylvia's mind was questing, whirling with conjecture. Had Nixie heard or hadn't she? Under her calm there was evident a nerve-strained tension. It seemed impossible that she could be taking it so calmly if she did know. But you never could tell with Nixie. Maybe she wanted to get away from the campus before the whole college knew. Well, there was only one way now; go straight to it.

"Nixie, do you know about Sidney Gale?"

"I know all that I need to know." The deep eyes suddenly blazed. The ungainly little figure straightened, tautened. "What do *you* know?"

"It's in the paper to-night."

"In the *paper*?" Uttermost amazement froze the speaker's face into momentary immobility. "It couldn't be," she breathed.

"It is. They found the body at three o'clock."

"I don't know what you're talking about," returned Nixie stupidly.

"You haven't heard? Oh, Nixie! Gallant Gale's committed suicide."

The troll-face quivered. The eyes opened very wide, then closed slowly and as slowly opened again. "Don't touch me, please." For Sylvia had feared that she was going to faint. "I hate to be handled. . . . Killed himself," she murmured. "Just what he would do. Sneaked out of it." She walked over to the mantel, took down the portrait and held it before her. "Yellow. Yellow all through." Deliberately she spat twice in the smiling face, then shied it into the grate where it wedged and stuck, slantwise and still smiling out upon

a world of passion and turmoil and grim reckonings wherewith it had finished forever.

Sylvia gave a little gasp and cry. "*Don't*, Nixie!"

"Tell me what you know about it," directed the other, disregarding.

Sylvia gave the best report she could. The listener caught at one point. "Burned letters? You say there were burned letters? Was anything left?"

"It just said 'papers.' Nixie! Had you written him? Was it a letter of yours that——

"Not exactly a letter. A—well, you might say an unofficial report." Again that frozen and inexplicable smile.

"Could it be traced?"

"That's the trouble. It might be if enough were left of it. Not directly to me, but to Sperry."

"If you want me to, I'll go down to the hotel and try to get Ralph Loyster by telephone. He might know."

"No. That'd only get you into it. It doesn't matter. I'll be gone to-morrow."

"But why were you going if you didn't know about this?"

"Other reasons."

"I don't know what they are and I don't want to pry. But if it's what I think it is I—I— isn't there some way I could help?"

The large head shook in slow negation. "You think I'm going to have a baby. Well, I'm not. At least, not that I know of." She laughed gratingly. "That *would* be the limit."

"Then I don't see why you're leaving. Wait for a little while anyway. The year's nearly over."

"It is over for me."

"But coming right after Gallant Gale's suicide, everybody will say——

"It doesn't matter what they say. I've *got* to leave."

Sylvia considered. "The girls know that I've come over here. What shall I tell them about your leaving?"

The haggard face grew grimmer. "I don't know what you'll tell them. But if you want to know for yourself, look up Rule Eighteen, unless you happen to remember it. And—good night."

Rule Eighteen! Rule Eighteen! Out in the darkness of the campus Sylvia's half-numb brain tried to remember, but vainly; tried to collate the hints and clues and strange secrecies of that interview, but to no more purpose. Lights were out when she got back to Trumbull. Ida's grisly news had dispersed the party. Verity had not returned and Starr was in bed.

Sylvia began a search for the Book of Regulations. It was nowhere to be found. They never are. More and more frenetic grew her quest. A voice interrupted her. Starr stood sleepily in the doorway.

"What are you throwing things around for?"

"Where's the Reg?"

"How should I know? What do you want of it?"

"I want to look up a rule."

"Come to bed. It's too late to break any more rules to-night," yawned Starr.

"Starr, what's Rule Eighteen?"

"Eighteen? Search me. Oh, lemme think, though. Isn't that the one about reporting to the Doc? Any

student suffering from an infectious or contagious disease must at once report— What's the matter, Syl?"

Sylvia had gone to the window, thrown it wide, and was gulping in the fresh air.

Enlightenment had come to her in an intolerable blaze. She felt sick and soiled.

CHAPTER XXIV

TABITHA of the Seven Toes shinned up a tree the better to observe an object moving across the ripples of Lake Risiquara. Undeniably it was a boat, and unquestionably it was headed for the island. The long, easy sweep of the oars suggested the stroke of Harvey Westfall. Tabitha was pleased. She was perfectly competent to maintain herself indefinitely on the chipmunks and field mice of the terrain, but she craved human companionship.

Tabitha purred, somewhat prematurely as it proved. For the boat had stopped. The rower was resting on his oars.

"There," said he to his passenger, "lies the island home."

"I never expected to see it again," murmured the passenger.

"When didn't you ever expect to see it again?" he queried.

"Never," was the reply which, as embodying an extra negative, might be taken either one of two ways. Mr. Westfall interpreted it to suit himself.

"You mean that there never has been a time when you didn't expect to see it again."

"Is that what I mean? Probably it is," she admitted, whereupon the two young and joyous idiots laughed as if at the most consummate humor of the ages.

"Anyway," pursued Verity, "I never expected yesterday afternoon at this time that I'd be here this afternoon at this time."

"Fair enough. I did."

"Oh, you did! I like your nerve."

"I rather like it myself. It's done very well for me so far. What's your view as to my coming back there to kiss you?"

"Don't rock the boat," she returned severely. "There's a time for all things—as a well-known authority once stated."

"That reminds me." He dropped the oars which he had resumed upon her veto. "Half way across Lake Rubicon Cæsar paused, lit a cigarette, and recalled something that had slipped his mind."

"The Rubicon. Is that what you call this?"

"Well, isn't it appropriate? There lies the shore we've just come from. I'm only the boatman. If you tell me to turn and row back——"

"Isn't it a little late for that?"

"Depends on the angle of view. You're free, white, and getting on for twenty-one."

"I'm not! Do *you* want to go back?"

"Not in a million years."

"What was it Cæsar recalled after his cigarette got going?"

"An unfortunate—I mean fortunate misunderstanding. What did those two spoons mean?"

Vee's firm little chin fairly sagged with amazement. "What did they *mean*? You're the one that ought to know. I don't suppose you've forgotten."

"I haven't forgotten because I never knew."

"See here, Harvey Westfall, did you or did you not send them to me with the flowers?"

"I believe I did. I further believe that there was some deeply esoteric symbolism attached to them. And I'd like to know what it is."

"Are you joking?"

"Never was more serious in my melancholy young life."

"If you didn't hear what I said to you in Lower Seven——"

"Never was in Lower Seven in my untravelled young life," he interrupted cheerfully.

"You—never—were—in—Lower—Seven?"

"Not that I remember. I always start at the last minute and usually draw Upper Twelve."

"Then who was the man?" she demanded wildly.

"Haven't the remotest idea."

"It must have been you. If it wasn't, how did you know?"

"Intuition," was the airy reply. "Plus a little outside help from a couple of good fairies."

"Sylvia and Starr," she interpreted. "They gave me away. What swine! I hate them, and I hate you, and——"

"In the words of your own inspired sentiment, isn't it a little late for that?"

"You cheated."

"I admit it. I'd do it again to rescue you from the Unknown Demon of the Pullman."

"He wasn't a demon. He was a—a duck. And if I ever come across him——"

"I'll shoot him," said Mr. Harvey Westfall pleas-

antly. "Then there can't be any further confusion."

"I never would have believed that you—that any one could be such a—such a——"

"You'll be able to believe much more after dinner, as the White Queen said. There's Tabitha waving her tail in welcome from that rock, and you may have heard that it's very bad luck to disappoint a seven-toed cat, so I really think, as she's expecting us to dinner we'd better hurry. *Roasbeefroasporkamaneggsboiledtripe-sweetcornlimabeansanallkindsapieteercoffee.*"

Verity laughed helplessly. "You're going to be a disgustingly hard person to keep angry with; I can see that. But I can manage it after dinner."

He took up the oars. "Forward, legionnaires!" cried Cæsar, beating it for the further bank, "Victory is ours."

Tabitha welcomed them with rapture.

"Do you recognize this rock, darling?" inquired the proprietor of the island as he helped his passenger ashore. "This is where you deliberately pushed the boat off so as to com——"

"I didn't!"

"This time I'll make it fast in case we should ever want to go back."

"I'm going back right after dinner," said Verity with dignity.

"In that case I'd better go out and get some firewood." With Tabitha as escort he did this, built and lighted a fire while Verity undid the various bundles brought with them in the boat.

"Now," she directed, "you may sit down and watch."

"But I thought you told me last time that you couldn't cook."

"I couldn't then. I've taken a domestic science course since."

"I see. On purpose."

"Certainly *not*—pig!"

"It's a natural inference though," he blandly pointed out. "I distinctly remember telling you that I needed a cook to spoil me. And here you are."

"Don't be so poisonously conceited."

"It's a corking good supper," he was pleased to concede an hour later. "Practically as good as I could do myself."

"I owed you that. It isn't all I owe you, either. I expect to return the money you lent me as soon as I get back."

He grinned his cheerful grin. "Does this mean that all is over between us?"

"It means that I expect to make a lot of money with your money."

"And how, if one may ask?"

"On a bet. A sure thing."

"Whoops! Have I fallen in love with a gambler?"

"I hope so. No, I don't. I don't care. I'd forgotten that you aren't even the right man."

"Still sore at me for not being Lower Seven?"

"Furious." (She didn't sound it.)

He rose and went into the inner room. "There's a perfectly good lock on the door," he pointed out. "And there's Gwen, perched on the mantel for a perfectly good chaperon. Me, I'm going to take Tabitha on a stroll around the estate while you think it over."

When he and the Seven-Toed got back the inner room was dark. The outer room was dim and singularly lonely. Harvey turned up the light and looked at the closed and forbidding door. He turned his eyes away from it and there was manifested to his surprised gaze a portent.

The picture of Gwen the Chaperon had been transferred from the mantel of the inner room to the mantel of the outer room. Harvey blew out the light.

"Good night, Tabitha," said he courteously to the Seven-Toed.

Over the breakfast, cooked and set out by Mr. Harvey Westfall, it being his turn, there was that familiar domestic scene, a discussion.

"But I've got to get back Harve. Why, Commencement's next week."

"Well, of course, if you're so anxious to go——"

"I don't want to go a *bit*. But you don't want to see me kicked from coll, do you?"

"N—no."

"That's what'll happen unless I catch that train."

"I'll tell you," said he with an air of inspiration as fresh as if he had not been making the same suggestion in various forms for the past hour. "Let's stay here for lunch; then I'll row you back and we'll pick up the car and I'll run you back in that."

"But I've told you I'm afraid. We'd be sure to run into somebody we know, on the road."

"I've been studying out a back roadway. Land you safely at a trolley terminus within seven miles of the campus."

"I ought not to," she wavered. "But I'd so love to. Oh, *all* right! I don't care."

At eight o'clock that evening Mr. Harvey Westfall's car, suffering from some obscure form of locomotor ataxia was stalled beside a large, soft mud puddle on one of those back roads which he had mentioned with such confidence.

"We walk," he decided penitently after futile explorations within the hood.

"Where to?"

He consulted a map. "There's an inn at Graeme, less than two miles from here."

"But Harve, darling, we can't stay at an inn."

"Why not?"

"There's too much risk of being seen."

"Not so much at this time of night. We certainly can't spend the night here. It's coming on to rain."

"Isn't there any way I can get to college?"

"I might be able to hire a car somewhere. But at that, we couldn't make it before two or three A. M."

"No good." Vee surrendered. "I'm awfully tired. I'll have to telephone Starr to fix things up for me. I guess she can work it. They get a little careless and easy around commencement time."

Two muddled and weary young people arrived at the Graeme Inn. While Harvey Westfall was registering (in a somewhat imaginative manner) Vee got her roommate on long distance. She returned with news.

"Sara La Lond has won the Alumnæ. And I've won a lot of money. So now I can pay you back."

"Isn't it a little late for——"

"Hush yourself up," said the girl softly.

Mrs. Hildegarde Protheroe, Organizer, President, and Itinerant Lecturer of the White Lily League of Purity, stood in the courtyard of the Graeme Inn preparatory to making an early morning start. Her eye, sweeping the façade of the ancient building, was arrested at an open window on the second floor. Any eye might have paused there and with pleasure, for the face in the window was laughing out upon a day of June glamour no more lovely and fresh and joyous than itself. The laughter faded, stricken cold by the chilling gaze of propriety incarnate in the person and glare of Mrs. Hildegarde Protheroe. The face, dismayed, hastily withdrew. Mrs. Protheroe marched back into the inn.

"Oh, Harve!" said Verity, breathless.

"What's up?" asked the owner of the name through a haze of lather.

"Mrs. Protheroe. I'm sure she saw me."

"Who's Mrs. Protheroe?"

"The lecturer. You know. Babe Protheroe's mother."

"That leaves me cold, too. Who's Babe Protheroe?"

"She's a Sperry Junior."

"Does Mommer Protheroe know you?"

"I met her once at a reception. When she lectured at coll. I don't believe she knows who I am."

"Then what's the alarm?"

"She looked as if she were trying to remember me."

"Well, I don't see how any one that had once seen you could forget you," said Harvey more flatteringly than reassuringly. "At that, you've got a right to shelter at an inn."

"Ye—es. But—Harve, please be a darling and wipe

your face off and go down and see what she's doing."

"Anything to oblige." He returned presently with a discomfiting report. "She was holding high debate with the clerk and studying the register."

"I told you!" mourned Verity.

"Well, she won't get much out of that."

"Is she there yet? Maybe she's waiting for me."

"No. She's gone. In a car."

"Probably going straight to Sperry," prophesied the girl dismally. "And," she added acidly, "she's a nice one to make trouble! After the way her own daughter behaves."

"How does she behave and when?" queried Harvey mildly.

"I'd hate to tell you! She's the wildest speeder on the campus. Everybody knows about Babe. She's practically one-of-them-things."

"Meaning not precisely a vestal, I suppose. It sometimes works that way," philosophized Mr. Westfall. "Rebound from early repressions and all that. But there's no immediate worry about the gorgon. Her car was going in the opposite direction when last seen."

"I don't care," fretted Verity. "I've got to get back just as soon as ever I can."

A rented car landed her at a trolley line. As she stepped on the platform Harvey Westfall called after her:

"Oh, Vee!"

"What?"

"I nearly forgot. What was it about those spoons?"

"You'll never know. Never!" answered the girl with great determination as the car bore her away.

CHAPTER XXV

Four deep-drawn, laboring puffs the locomotive gave, getting under way the reluctant train in one of whose coaches sat reluctant Sylvia. They seemed to the girl like thick sobs, the dry, thick, slow sobs of some one forcing herself to abandon a loved place. Then came a flurried, panting outburst as the wheels spun and the cars jerked forward. Blessedly alone—there were but half a dozen other passengers in the car, none of whom did she know—she huddled in the corner, propped her tired head on her hand and stared out into the grayness. It was a murky day. The trees dribbled moisture. The earth was draggled and sodden. She closed her eyes against it.

Some one standing over her, after a time, an indeterminate time. The conductor. Her ticket; what had she done with it? She fumbled at her bag. A voice said "Sylvia!" Giff's voice, imperative, yet gentle and grave.

"Oh!" she said. "Why have you come?"

"I heard just in time."

"I thought you were away," she returned stupidly. There was refuge in the commonplaceness of the words.

"I have been." He sat down beside her. The conductor came on his rounds. Sylvia found her ticket. Gifford's was to a town an hour down the line. She thought back to another, fateful meeting on a train.

"It's just like the first time, isn't it?" She smiled faintly at him. "When you sat down by me and asked me if I'd ever been drunk. The time when it all began."

"It began long before that."

"Did it? I suppose it did. I was afraid of you before that, Giff. I think I—I'm a little afraid of you again."

"Sylvia, you must come back."

She shook her head. "I can't."

"Rot!"

"Truly, I can't, Giff."

"Why not?"

"I just can't." Her eyes pleaded with him not to ask any more.

"See here, Sylvia; if I'll keep out of your way, not see you for the rest of the term——"

"That wouldn't make any difference. It isn't that."

"Then what in the name of all that's inbecilic is it?" he demanded in exasperation.

"I wrote you a note to tell——"

"I didn't get it."

"No, of course not. It wasn't mailed till last night. Stupid of me. My head feels funny, Giff. And my heart; that feels funny, too. . . . What are you going to Bartonsville for?"

"Nothing. I took the train because I knew you were on it."

"How did you know? If you didn't get my——"

"Never mind how. I'm not going to let you go."

"You're making it awfully hard," she murmured sorrowfully.

"If it's that damned Shenstone woman——"

"Oh, no! It's more serious than that. Much."

He looked at her, imperious, insistent. She answered the look.

"Do I have to tell you, Giff?"

"Did you expect that I'd let you go without?"

The eternal feminine sprang to life within Sylvia, the impulse to test her lover's faith in her. "Suppose it were something I've done. Something I'm ashamed to tell you?"

"Don't be an ass."

In spite of her misery for herself and for him she laughed. It was so absolutely Giffish, that retort.

"Just the same I'd have been kicked if I hadn't got out."

"Will — you — kindly — tell — me — why?" — in the rigid, measured tone of one sorely tried, yet maintaining his temper against severe pressure.

"There was a note found. It was lost the night of the fire drill."

"Well?" he barked.

"It was traced to me."

"Signed?"

"No. It was typed. But there were references that were easy to trace. So I—owned up to it."

"What was in it?"

"The references? One was to a hike——"

"No, not the references. Damn the references. What was in it that you owned up to."

She said carefully: "There was a secret date. For a week-end with a man, in New York." For the moment she found it an impossible effort to lift her eyes to his.

What would she read in that intent look of his? Shock? Wrath? Jealousy? Bewilderment? Hurt?

She wrenched her own gaze up and read—laughter.

“You’re a most inept little liar, my dear,” he said.

“Better give it up.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“Nobody would believe you who wasn’t a born fool.”

“Do you trust me as much as that, Giff dear?”

“Absolutely.” Their hands slipped together, curved into each other.

“That makes it easier,” she murmured. Then, with a little, smothered cry: “No. It makes it harder.”

“Don’t you think you’d better tell me the truth now?”

“I can’t. It wouldn’t be— It wouldn’t do any good.”

“Because you’re shielding some one else. I see I shall have to figure it out for myself from what information I now have. That shouldn’t be very difficult. Given a compromising note lost, shortly before a scholarship contest with heavy betting on it, a reversal in the betting odds——”

“Don’t, Giff!”

“——in spite of the fact that La Lond was morally certain to win unless there was some unknown factor against her——”

Her fingers tightened on his in a spasm of strength that checked his words. She began to speak, low, hurriedly, pleadingly, as to a judge. “Giff, I was no good here, anyway. I didn’t matter. Sara does. She matters more than any one. You said that, yourself.

You'd have done the same thing, yourself, in my place. You know you would. If they'd pinned it on Sara it would have meant the end for her. With me it only means——"

"The end for us," he said with such bitterness that she winced away from him. "Well, doesn't it?" he challenged savagely.

"It had to come anyway, a separation," she whispered. "How could we keep on as we were?"

"How are we to keep on without each other? Have you thought of that?"

"Have I thought of anything else!" It burst from her. "I've thought until I can't think any more. That's why I'm going."

"Where?"

"Abroad. For all summer. And when I come back I'm going to get a job somewhere. Perhaps in New York. There are front doors to jobs."

"What does that mean?" he asked, puzzled.

"Nothing," she answered hastily. "I was just thinking. After I've settled down somewhere away from you, maybe I'll be able to think it all out and find out what this really is that has happened to us."

"I know now," was his dogged response.

"We think we know." Suddenly she felt older than he, wiser, more understanding, more capable of facing this overmastering force that had them in its whirl. "But it's been too sudden, too tremendous, too—possessing. We've got to get to one side and look at it. If we don't see each other for three or four months——" Her voice died woefully.

After a time he said: "Shall I write to you?" Any

one else she knew would have said: "Will you write to me?"

"I'd rather you wouldn't."

"Then I won't."

"You'll know, when I come back."

"Yes; I'll know." (What did that curiously assured tone of his mean?)

He got up. "This isn't your station," she cried in quick alarm, for he had risen.

"This or the next—what does it matter?" he answered. "Will you come with me—just to the platform?"

She followed him down the aisle. Amidst the squealing of the breaks she said: "Giff, there's one thing you've got to tell me. You've *got* to."

"What is it?"

"You've got to say that you know I was right about Sara." (For, without that, how should she save her belief in him, in his loyalty to the only religion that he professed?)

"Yes. You were right."

Then for a swift, reckless, unheeding moment she was in his arms, his lips seeking and finding her soul. The train jolted them apart, moved on. She stared through the window and saw him standing straight and slender and as she knew now with a pang and a thrill, unforgettable in the gray rain and the mist.

CHAPTER XXVI

ONCE again Suite Twenty was in crowded session. Summer vacation had come and gone with that inexplicable swiftness known grievously to all collegians. Returning, the clans of Trumbull Hall repaired at once to the lair of the H.B.V.'s as the natural exchange for gossip, opinion, and prospects. Starr alone was in domicile on this, the opening day of the semester. Zigzags of conversation flew through the air like flashes from overcharged clouds, to be enhanced as each newcomer put in an appearance.

"Hail, Sorores!"

"Hail, yourself."

"Everybody back?"

"Pretty near."

"Too early to count noses yet."

"Good vacation?"

"Grand."

"Putrid."

"Wouldn't give it better than a C."

"Wish there was three months more of it."

"Not me; I'm glad to be back."

"Good li'l scholar! Gonna win all the prizes, huh?"

"——private car party took us in on the crest——"

"Why elect trouble? That's the meanest course——"

"——certainly looked like hell in that hat, if you
ask——"

"And get a thumb in the eye? I'll stick to hockey, thanks."

"—fourteen pounds off the old tummy in less than six wee——"

"She told her family it was measles."

"Two semesters of back Latin; that's what wrecked my——"

"Wide open as a frog's mouth and cocktails only fifty cents apiece."

"But her clothes would daze you."

"Here's Gwen."

"'lo, Gwen!"

"Now we'll get the dirt."

"Hello, children. Not from me, you won't. I've been roughing it all vake."

"You look it."

"Thanks or not, as the case may be."

"Haven't you seen any one?"

"Yep. Saw Nixie in the station at New York." At this there was a concentration of interest.

"What's Nixie doing?"

"Entering Johns Hopkins. Special."

"Was there anything in that story about her being—that she was going to——"

"Bunk!" said Miss Peters vigorously. "She's no more that way than—than old Shinbone."

"Be respectful," warned some one with a giggle.

"If there was nothing in it, why did Gallant Gale kill himself?" demanded Jessamine Dahl.

"I met up with a Williams man at a house party"—this from Roxy Ann Merrick—"and he told me it

was all over college that Gallant had got an official looking envelope from Sperry that morning."

"Official document," jeered Gwen. "I suppose you think in those cases that the President and Faculty of Sperry College for Women have the honor to inform, and so on, et cetera."

"Nixie quit the next day," pointed out Golden Ruehl. "There must have been some sort of tie-up."

Celia Forsythe from her seat in the window said: "This place isn't going to seem the same without Sylvia."

"Oh, shut *up!*" snapped Starr.

"Where is she?"

"Got a job in New York."

"Well, that isn't so far from Sperry," murmured a voice and Celia added:

"Speaking of the devil, there goes our Giff with his war club."

"Why who said anything about Giff?" queried Nell Dana innocently, thereby provoking ribald mirth. Nell never knew what was going on until the rest of the circle had discarded it as stale news.

Helen Quigg joined the lookout in the window seat. "He looks kinda old and tired, don't you think?" she observed. "Hasn't got the old spring in his gait."

"Maybe Syl ditched him," suggested somebody. "She sure hit him hard and then they say she got a case on another man."

"Was that the one whose letters were found?" asked Jessamine Dahl.

"I heard that Only Ida McKay picked 'em up in the

hall and sold 'em to Sally Messmore for twenty dollars and a tartan blouse."

"If that's true," said Starr grimly, "I don't think Ida will have a very happy life in this house this year."

"Messmore's out. Prexy had a little heart-to-heart with her and she decided not to come back."

"There isn't much going on that slips past our Prexy. Is he foolish? Yes; like a fox!"

"Well, I understood that Sara La Lond was mourning some lost love lyrics that same night of the fire alarm."

"Gee! The halls must have been full of pash! No fit place for a young thing like me," snickered Helen Quigg.

"La Lond's boat gets in Saturday. She should worry! With the Alumnæ Scholarship tucked in her jeans."

"Who's coming into Twenty in Syl's place?"

"I have that honor," answered Gwen magniloquently.

"And who's taking Vee Clarke's room?"

"What's that about Vee?" Starr's query cut across the babble.

"She isn't coming back, is she?"

"Of course she's coming back. Why wouldn't she be?"

"Well, don't bite me. I only picked up some gas about her having ducked out just before Commerce-ment. They say she was on a double tour."

"Who says that?" demanded Starr.

"Olga Tremwich is spreading it."

"Tremwich!" Starr's echo of the name was fiery with

scorn. "You know how that kind are when they turn on any one."

"What's her grief?"

"Jealous. That's all there is to her. She probably made it up."

"No. She got it from Babe Protheroe's mother."

"Is *she* here?"

"Yep. Spending a few days with her angel daughter to make sure that she doesn't get into any wrong associations for the new year."

"Omigod!" said Gwen.

In her ear Starr muttered: "That doesn't look so good. I wish Vee would show up."

On the following noon Vee appeared looking radiant. She was full of the Caravanners' summer trip on which she had made a distinct hit. When Starr failed to respond to her enthusiasm Vee's own zest simmered down. "What's the gloom about, Twinklestar? Missing Syl? So'm I."

"Vee, did Mrs. Protheroe see you anywhere just before Commencement?"

The light went out of the alluring face. "I'll say she certainly did. Why?"

"She's here. And she's been talking."

Verity whistled long and low. "I told Harve"—The other looked up quickly at the name—"that she had spotted us."

"Us?" repeated Starr.

"Yes; us," returned Verity quietly. "In a second story window."

Pink Delavan blew into the room like a gale and gave

greeting, "Hello, Vestals! Vee, what hellment have you been up to now?"

"Nothing that you haven't heard about, most likely," replied Starr for the other.

"Don't get rancid at *me*. I'm not responsible."

"Who is?"

"Mrs. Hildegarde Lilywhite Protheroe. She's been to Prex."

"What about? Me?" asked Vee.

"About the general degraded morals of Sperry. She can't bear the thought of her pure young Babe associating with girls of loose character. Babe! Wouldn't that frizzle your liver?"

"Did she tell Prexy that I was a girl of loose character?"

"She wasn't sure who it was, but she saw some girl that she recognized as a Sperry stoo-jent in a hotel room, with a lathery face in the background. It seems to have been the Protheroe's idea that young ladies don't lather their faces in the morning and therefore the other party must have been a gent."

"Fair enough," admitted Vee coolly. "What's she going to do about it?"

"Oh, she thought it would be nice if Prexy would hold a review of the whole coll so she can pick out the guilty wretch."

"Fetchin' little fancy!" commented Starr. "Did she actually spring that on our Billy B.?"

"So I understood."

"What'd he say?"

"What would you suppose? Told her to go to hell,

of course, in that old-school, unimpeachably courtly way of his."

"I'd love to have been there," yearned Starr.

"I'm going there," announced Vee. "Now."

"Lay off," counseled Pink. "That is, if there's anything in it. They haven't got a thing on you if you can just keep away from the Protheroe."

"Tremwich has been spilling something about it," put in Starr.

"Probably looked up the green cards and found that Vee was off," surmised the visitor. "That's just the sort of thing she would do." She looked at Vee hesitantly. "Of course there was a bunch of you in the room," she said. "Only the old cat didn't see the others. Better leave it lay."

"I'm going to see Prex," declared Vee.

Her chin was out. Starr knew better than to attempt dissuasion. The girl set out for the office of President William B. Cressline, the wise, the grave, the gentle, the humorous (without humor where would he have been, a lone man riding and controlling the storm-currents of a sea of feminine emotions, rivalries, loyalties, jealousies?), the open-minded and close-mouthed old head of Sperry College for Christian Gentlewomen.

In an hour she was back, her eyes abnormally bright.

"What did he say?" demanded the waiting Starr.

"Enough. Starr, you'll have to get another H.B.V. I'm officially disqualified."

"Oh, *Vee!* Are you kicked?"

"If you cry I'll beat you up. I'm not kicked. I've resigned."

"Then he did know about you and Harvey."

"We—ell, he had a line on it."

"That stinker of a Protheroe woman!"

"What she told him wasn't so much. I told him the rest. You have to play straight with Prex. He's such an old duck!"

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him I was married."

"And I suppose he believed it," jeered her roommate. "Couldn't you think of a funnier one than that?"

"Lot's of 'em," was the cheerful reply. "But this one happens to be true."

"Mar—Vee! To Harvey?"

"Who did you think it was to? Lucky Lindbergh?"

"I don't believe it. Is it legal?"

"I hope so," said Vee demurely.

"Aren't you going to tell me about it?"

"Yep. The night I sloped from the party here—when I got the telephone message, you know—Harve was waiting in Lovers' Lane. The minute I set eyes on him—well, maybe not that very minute but pretty darn soon afterward—I knew it was all over for little Vee. It hits some people that way," she added naïvely.

"It's never hit me that way," murmured Starr. "I'd never feel sure."

"Then don't go ahead," advised the younger girl from the heights of her superior experience. She continued: "He had his car waiting off campus. He said 'I'm going to take you back to the island.' And I said, 'All right,' just as if it was the most natural thing in the world to be taking all night trips to a lonely island with a man. It seemed perfectly natural—with Harve. After we'd gone about forty or fifty or ten miles he

said 'If you know any reason why this man and this woman should not be joined together in the bonds of matrimony by our friend Jim Bascover, Justice of the Peace for the town of Risley Centre, speak now or forever after hold the thought.' And I said 'Not as far as I'm concerned if that's the way you feel about it.' And that's all there was to it."

"That's a vurry, vurry pretty li'l story," observed Starr. She felt muddled and dulled and couldn't think of anything better to say.

"It isn't quite all, either. On the way to the island he fessed up about Lower Seven and the spoons, and I was so sore that I nearly declared a lock-out on him. But I didn't—quite. Just the same I think you and Syl are a pair of perjured swine."

"Where'd you be now if we hadn't removed that Pullman inhibition?" retorted the other and answered herself: "Looking for a man with a gentle whisper and a forebearing nature and a preference for sleep over—over—adventure."

"Don't make me blush," said Vee. "I'm a respectable married woman."

"Then what did you come back for?"

"That's what Harve says. He's been chasing the Caravanners around this summer, on and off, like a stage door Johnnie. I came back because I did want to go on with my course. Through Sophomore, anyway; especially in drama. Oh, well! No luck. I don't know that I care so much, though." She turned upon her roommate a peaceful smile. "Sperry's a grand old joint and a monument to learning and the hope of

American womanhood and all that bunch of noble sentiment, but it isn't such a swell place to have a baby in, d'you think, Twinklestar?"

That night when Starr, feeling lonely and lost, came back to Suite Twenty, a ghost sat in the window seat smoking a Camel. The ghost spoke in a cool, soft voice.

"Hello, Starr."

"*Syl!* You duck!" There was a sudden tangle of girlhood out of which rose Starr's rebuking words. "You *perfect* idiot! Don't you know better than to show a light directly in front of a window?"

"Pardon, Cæsar," laughed the other. "I've been free and independent so long that I just forgot."

"How did you get here?"

"Landed at Halifax and thought I'd drop off over a train. Little touch of the homesicks."

"Oh, Syl! It's going to be ghastly without you—and Vee, too."

"Vee? What's happened to our chee-ild?"

Starr told the story at length. "Swell stuff! I guess we're some plotters," exulted Sylvia. "We sure eliminated the Pullman hunch."

"You're going to stay the night, aren't you?"

"Can't. Got an anxiously waiting job. I'm taking the midnight-plus train."

"I think that's rotten. . . . What about Europe? Not married—or engaged—or anything?"

"No." Sylvia leaned out of the window to drink in the soft air. A breeze shuffled the boughs of the near-by tree, parting the leaves. The girl sighed.

Starr sympathetically interpreted the long look and

sigh. "No light now in the tower room. There wasn't, after you left."

"I'm glad," said Sylvia in a shaken voice.

"Is it as bad as that?"

"Yes; it's as bad as that."

"Then—if you'll bend down and look through the other window, low—where they've cut out that fuzzy bush that used to occupy the bend—you can see Giff's office window." She stooped, herself, peering. "There's a light there now. He'll be working there half the night."

"Will he?" The expatriate's voice was carefully unconcerned. "Give me the latest bulletins on the crowd. I'm news-hungry."

They talked eagerly until eleven struck; then the visitor showed signs of becoming distraught, inattentive. It was hardly a quarter after the hour when she rose.

"It isn't nearly train time yet," protested Starr. "More than an hour."

"I know. But I'm—restless."

Starr stole a glance at her friend. Sylvia's eyes were wide and bright. Her breath was eager through the soft curve of her lips. Again Starr bent to look out into the night.

"Is the light still there?" whispered Sylvia.

"Yes."

"Good-by, Starr, dear."

"Good-by, Syl. Will you come back sometimes?"

"Yes. I think I'll come back—sometimes."

Starr, left alone, turned over the framed motto of Suite Twenty and fell into reverie before it. What was the answer to it all, this disrupting, commanding im-

pulse which had swept her companions before it like a conquering wave? Was it a mere localized phenomenon, an exaggerated tendency due to a super-feminized environment? Or was it only that girls of the post-adolescent period developed a sort of mob-psychology of self-recognition and self-realization? Surely, women in the outer world, workers or idlers, did not let this one motive bulk so large in their more complex lives. She remembered a book by a German, furtively read, whose thesis it was that woman is a body without a soul, with thoughts, desires, plans, instincts directed to the sole end of love and reproduction, and all that was romantic in her revolted. Yet, how much he could find at Sperry, at any woman's college, to support his cynical and dogmatic grossnesses. She thought of the events of the year past, outgrowths of that explosive motivation; Nixie's sly lecheries, so long unfulfilled, so mysteriously terminated or perhaps only transferred; Sara La Lond's hardy acceptance of the implications of her womanhood and her temperament; Babe Protheroe's crude and calculated harlotry; Verity with her face of a vestal who had answered the call with as blind a race-instinct as any butterfly; Sylvia Hartnett, the chastest-minded of all of them who had asked of love only that it be love and had given herself with no hesitation of surrender nor with any taint of the huckstering advances and recoils of which Starr was shabbily conscious in herself; and amidst the turmoil of compliances and repressions, Prudence Chase moving on her course of life, cool and sweet and serene, a shepherdess of the sheep of her own white and wise thoughts.

Veritys come and Veritys go. Sylvias and Giffords gamble with their good repute in a fateful trial against the bank of public opinion and face the imminent loss unshrinking, or perhaps only unthinking; Sara La Londs, clear-eyed and with a sad sincerity, match flesh against mind and win or lose as the spirit is steady or vacillant; Nixies follow the path of passion; Babe Protheroes and the Balch Hall saleswomen go into the furtive market place and sell for the price of excitement, of adventure, or of a new bauble for their bodies; and ever the impatient quest of the new womanhood, inspired of the ancient and unslaked curiosities, answering the demand of imperious nerve-centers to know to the full, to be to the full, presses to the goal of vague or temporary or illuminating satisfactions, and damn the torpedoes!

Starr, in her young, opulent, tremulous, unfulfilled beauty standing a little on one side. Dubious. Hesitant. Expectant. Wondering. What was it all about?

THE END

